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# Gerbner's Cultivation Theory

**Passive audience theories seem rather outdated to 21st Century media consumers but in a year we all bulk bought pasta and toilet roll, Mark Dixon thinks Cultivation Theory is worth revisiting.**

I'm going to be honest; I have a bit of a soft spot for George Gerbner. His 1960s Cultivation Theory, in my mind at least, is the theoretical equivalent of an elderly relative: the kind who wears hearing aids for earrings and eyerolls anyone who dares to peek at their Instagram feed in their presence. Gerbner's passive audience argument, perhaps, feels similarly old and out of kilter with our times: a has-been theory that has lost the bright lustre it once had.

In terms of the named A Level media theorists, Stuart Hall might be viewed as the number one critic of Gerbner's ideas – with his fancy pants notions of active audiences, oppositional readings and his even fancier-pantsier idea that reader responses are uniquely

constructed via the contextual knowledge that they bring to texts.

But like I say, I have a soft spot for Gerbner; his research might be more twentieth century than twenty-first, but the notion that media products can effect widespread attitudinal change is just as valid today as it was all those years ago – the lack of toilet rolls on supermarket shelves during the Covid-19 crisis testifies, to the media's continued ability to cultivate widespread panic.

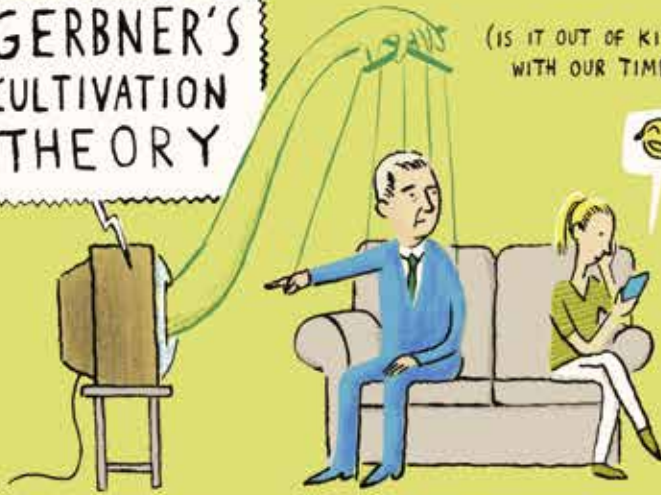
## Nazi Propaganda

It's important to note in any appraisal of Gerbner's ideas that he was born in 1919 and came into the world at the very same point that the media industry was beginning to earn its stripes as a mass phenomenon. Baby Gerbner was brought up in the age of wireless radio in Hungary and, more importantly, witnessed first-hand the ascent of fascism in Germany during his youth. Indeed, in 1939, at the tender age of just twenty, he escaped conscription into the Nazi army – fleeing first to Paris and later to America where he worked as a journalist before establishing his academic career in the late 1950s.

He had seen enough of the Third Reich's propaganda machine [...] to understand that the mass media – the news, radio and film – could be bent to serve the interests of a fanatical ideology.

# GERBNER'S CULTIVATION THEORY

(IS IT OUT OF KILTER WITH OUR TIMES?)



IN 1939, GEORGE GERBNER FLED HIS NATIVE HUNGARY, ESCAPING CONSCRIPTION INTO THE NAZI-ALIGNED ARMY



HAVING GROWN UP DURING THE ASCENT OF FASCISM, HE HAD SEEN HOW THE NEW MASS MEDIA COULD BE HARNESSSED TO SERVE THE INTERESTS OF A FANATICAL IDEOLOGY



IN 1950s AMERICA, HE WITNESSED THE TELEVISION BOOM,



NOTING THAT TV HAD REPLACED EDUCATION, RELIGION AND THE FAMILY AS THE 'PRIMARY SOCIALISER' OF CHILDREN

TELEVISION, IN HIS EYES, WAS AN OCEAN



IN WHICH WE ARE ALL UNWITTINGLY SWIMMING.

You talkin' to me?



HE DEVELOPED THE NOTION OF 'MEAN WORLD SYNDROME' TO DESCRIBE HOW DEPICTIONS OF VIOLENCE ON TV COULD MAKE AUDIENCES MORE FEARFUL OF THEIR SURROUNDINGS



OUT OF KILTER?



OUR SHOPPING HABITS AT THE START OF THE COVID PANDEMIC SUGGEST THAT WE ARE STILL VERY MUCH UNDER THE SWAY OF THE FORCES THAT GERBNER UNCOVERED.



AND HIS PIONEERING WORK ON THE IMPACT OF 'CASTING' DECISIONS OUTLINED THE MEDIA'S POWER TO PROPAGATE STEREOTYPES LINKED WITH AGE AND GENDER

Mean World Syndrome was as likely to be encultured through factual media content as fictional programming. News coverage, for example, of terrorism, crime and war, Gerbner argued, cultivated a 'siege mentality' that positioned audiences to be wary of the world that lay beyond the walls of their living rooms.

Gerbner's flight from Hungary before the Second World War meant that he escaped the worst of Nazi Germany's moral and economic decline, but he had seen enough of the Third Reich's propaganda machine before then to understand that the mass media – the news, radio and film – could be bent to serve the interests of a fanatical ideology. Those formative experiences might be seen to have laid the foundations of Gerbner's hypothesis that the media could have a dangerous and all-pervasive effect on social attitudes.

## The TV Boom

Later in his life, Gerbner also witnessed the television boom in 1950s America and, where he saw that the media had been hijacked by the Nazi regime in Germany, in the United States, Gerbner saw that mainstream television output was inextricably tethered to the commercial interests of big business, advertising and the pursuit of profit. Gerbner's concerns regarding the effects of mass media consumption were also driven by an assertion that the media had replaced education, religion and the family as the primary socialiser of children. 'It's not parents, nor the school, nor the church,' Gerbner tells us, 'who tell most of the stories but distant, global organisations who have something to sell'.

Gerbner pinpointed television's free-to-view and easy-to-understand storytelling presence as having a homogenising effect on audiences – that, in short, the nestled presence of all those millions of new television sets in homes across the USA could relay, for the first time, the same message to millions of viewers simultaneously.

**I think of television as an environment [...] as a tidal wave, a flood, an ocean in which we are all swimming without knowing or being aware of the nature of the ocean.**

## Effects of Violence

Gerbner was particularly interested in the effects of television violence, arguing that producers and directors of TV drama deployed ever-more violent content in the 1960s and 70s to capture and maintain audience interest. His ground-breaking violence index research pointed to the idea that this 'tidal wave' of violent television content encultured Mean World Syndrome – a shared social belief that the real world was far more aggressive and violent than it really was. The more screen-based conflict audiences consumed, Gerbner told us, the more fearful those audiences were in their real-world lives. Gerbner's research also concluded that Mean World Syndrome was as likely to be encultured through factual media



Images courtesy of the George Gerbner Archive, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania

content as fictional programming. News coverage, for example, of terrorism, crime and war, Gerbner argued, cultivated a 'siege mentality' that positioned audiences to be wary of the world that lay beyond the walls of their living rooms.

## Attitudes to Social Groups

It is also through what Gerbner called 'casting' decisions that the media produced some of its more problematic effects. The 'news' Gerbner tells us, 'deals with the exercise of power, who has it, who uses it, who seeks it, and, most of all, who threatens it'. The news and other media forms, he reminds us, are constructed using routine narrative strategies, strategies that link specific social groups to explicitly defined character roles. Females, Gerbner found, were more likely to play victim roles in television drama, while men were associated with authority-oriented figures. The media too routinely stigmatises some social groups, Gerbner argued, readily associating them in the mind of the audience with qualities that are questionable. Teenagers are rebellious. Characters with mental illness are dangerous. Such representations sway the real-world attitudes of audiences towards negative perceptions of those groups.

## Conclusion

Certainly, the arguments presented above aren't earth shattering to contemporary media students. It is also true that contemporary theory provides us with a more sophisticated model of audience consumption – that viewers use products for the purposes of cultural capital or that audiences can resist media messaging in a way that Gerbner neglects to account for. Perhaps we might also argue that the fragmented nature of the media landscape today means that the homogenising capacity of the media is no longer possible, while the increasingly diverse representations in contemporary media products also means that the stigmatising effects of

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casting that were so evident in 1970s narratives are no longer applicable.

Yet in Gerbner's work there are subtleties that are often missed. Yes, Gerbner puts forward the notion that we are all subject to the 'tidal wave' of media messaging that so pervades our lives. The media in this sense, constructs a 'mainstreaming' effect – subtly shifting the attitudes of society as a whole – but he also tells us that some groups are more susceptible to the media messaging than others. In terms of Mean World Syndrome, for example, his research concluded that those with adverse experiences of real-world crime were more likely to react with what he calls a 'resonance-based' response and that their TV-induced fears would be amplified compared to those with little or no experience of real-world crime.

We are all swimming in an ocean of media messaging, Gerbner tells us; it's just that some of us are paddling at the edges of that ocean. And honestly, who didn't buy at least one or two extra toilet rolls at the start of the pandemic? Not many of us, I would venture.

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