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Omneya A Shanab

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Cultivation Theory and the Effects of Television on Children

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

Omneya Hany A Shanab

Candidate for Bachelor of Science
and Renée Crown University Honors
Spring 2018

Honors Capstone Project in Broadcast & Digital Journalism

Capstone Project Advisor: _____ Dr. Keren Henderson _____
Advisor's Name and Title

Capstone Project Reader: _____ Professor Keith Kobland _____
Reader's Name and Title

Honors Director: _____
Chris Johnson, Interim Director

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Abstract

This project delves into Cultivation Theory and how it has developed over time. I looked not only at television, which was the original platform discussed in relation to the theory, but at digital and social spaces as well. As media develops as a whole I was curious to see how this theory ties into children's development and lives in general. My main interest was children, including those in lower income and minority homes.

Executive Summary

Like most people, I am a firm believer in that children are easily influenced. As a journalist, I am a curious person by nature, so I always thought about how much of an influence I could really have on people in general. I wondered what my stories meant to my audience, and if they would have a significant impact on their lives. In my four years as an undergraduate student, I had never heard the term ‘fake news’ used more than this past year and a half. This debacle surrounding fake news led me to think, how many people actually believe everything they see in media and take it as truth? I did some research and kept coming across the Cultivation Theory.

George Gerbner first introduced Cultivation Theory in the mid -1960s. Simply put, Cultivation Theory states that those who watch a lot of television are more likely to be influenced by what they see as compared to people who don’t watch as much television. So again, me being the curious soul that I am, I began to wonder if this theory could be expanded to cater to what media is today. In this age, media comes in so many different forms. People consume media through television, radio, social spaces, Youtube, digital platforms, and the Internet in general.

Gerbner thought that television didn’t always reflect the truth, so naturally if people automatically believed what they saw on television, then they would have this altered view of social realities. So technically speaking, if I were to apply this theory today that would mean, people who consume a lot of media (regardless of how or on what platform) are more likely to take what they see for truth.

Now, back to the children: why should we care? Well, technology is at its peak, therefore media is much more accessible regardless of your age, race, and social class. Children now are consuming media at a much higher rate than they were in the 60s. I chose this topic because I wanted to explore Cultivation Theory in relation to its effects on children. I wanted to know how parent-child relationships come into play, and more importantly, how altered a child's social reality really is.

As a Broadcast & Digital Journalism major, I have found myself very intrigued with digital spaces and their capabilities. So instead of creating a visual news piece for television, I decided that I would present my project as a website. I built a digital space where I house video interviews, interactive landscapes, and key information about Cultivation Theory. My website features three interviews. The first interview is with Dr. Carrie Brown, head of the CUNY J-School's M.A. in Social Journalism program. Dr. Brown speaks on the importance of Social Journalism, and how it has developed over time. The second interview is with Dr. Makana Chock, an Associate Professor in Communications at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. Dr. Chock spoke to me about how Cultivation Theory applies to Social Media and other Digital Platforms. The last of the three interviews is with TeNesha Murphy, co-host of Bridge Street, a local morning talk show on News Channel 9. Murphy speaks on the Syracuse community and how television influences the youth and minority population here.

So, what does this have to do with journalism? Well, a journalist is supposed to educate the public about what is going on in the world around them. The only way to do that is to expose the truth and nothing but the truth. Through my work, I hope that my

digital space is one where children and adults can go to gain real and accurate information about the world, so that when they leave my digital space, their view of the world is not fake.

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Chapter 1 Cultivation Theory

“I must say I find television very educational. The minute somebody turns it on, I go into the library and read a good book.” ~Groucho Marx

Since it was first introduced in the 1940’s, television has attracted viewers of all ages, including infants and toddlers. Despite the negativity surrounding the medium, it has remained one of the most common forms of entertainment, even for those who claim to despise it. Orson Welles once said, “I hate television. I hate it as much as peanuts. But I can't stop eating peanuts.” Even for an author as renowned and respected as Welles, as well as many others like him, television proves to be an addiction that doesn’t appear to be dying out anytime in the near future. Although people are well aware that the television programs they watch give an unrealistic portrayal of life and relationships, they still feel the urge to get sucked into that world anyway.

For decades, experts have argued that television has negative effects on the development of young children. Many question whether this kind of exposure has led to a decline in critical thinking and analysis. As television has become more and more popular, research shows a drop in other activities such as reading and writing, especially in young people. With the popularity of television has come numerous amounts of research and studies in order to understand its effects. Researchers have sought to prove that television has more negative than positive effects, specifically on the youth of today. How does watching television on a regular basis affect the way people perceive real life? Does watching television as a toddler affect the development of that child? In this paper, I will discuss what kind of role television plays in the lives of people from an early age to

adolescence as well as attempt to expand the Cultivation Theory to other types of media.

Chapter 2

Television As Education

According to experts, social and behavioral developments are extremely important during early childhood. A lot of things we learn and do during those years can have major long-term effects. For that reason, it is important to study and understand media use by young children, mainly television consumption since the mid 1900's. One study conducted by Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro (2008) looked to prove that watching television at a very young age is the reason for the decline in adolescent SAT scores. Their findings were not what they expected.

To try to test this theory, the researchers studied the steady decline in SAT scores starting from the years most families began introducing television sets into their homes: between 1940 and 1950. They found that the majority of children watched an average of three and a half hours a day. After connecting children's television-viewing habits to their SAT scores they unexpectedly found that not only did their scores not decline, they had actually steadily increased. This was especially true for children who lived with non-English speaking parents, low-income communities, or those who had mothers with less than a high school diploma. If anything, watching television was viewed as something beneficial for educational and intellectual development.

They also found positive effects on learning the longer children watched television during the day. "These findings point toward an important economic intuition that is often overlooked in the popular debate about television: the cognitive effects of television exposure depend critically on the educational value of the alternative activities

that it crowds out. Like other early-childhood interventions, television seems to be most beneficial for children who are relatively disadvantaged. For children with highly educated parents and rich home environments, the cognitive effects of television appear to be smaller and may even be negative” (Gentzow & Shapiro 2008, p. 282). Although these findings may seem surprising to some, they do make sense. Children who are not exposed to other educational activities at home may view television as an educational platform from which they can learn. Some children with parents who have had little education may not have anyone to read to them at home or help them with their homework and studies afterschool. These children may find that viewing television will help expose them to new things they never thought they would come across.

Even though many have viewed television as a hurtful medium because of all the violence and unrealistic life situations it exposes people to, people tend to forget that there are other programs on television that can have positive effects. Watching the news, talk shows, and other educational programming (history, science, etc.) can have positively shape the mind of young viewers. They can learn new information from watching these programs about which they would otherwise not have access.

These results are a reminder that television does not always have a negative effect on the brain. It is a complicated medium that cannot be put into just one category, especially with all the different shows and movies that we have access to today. When it comes to television there are many factors that contribute to whether or not it can be harmful to the public. Depending on the age of the viewer, the type of programs an individual chooses to watch, and how long someone sits in front of the television during the day, it can either have positive or negative effects on the viewer.

Chapter 3 Background Television & Children

An interesting article called “The Impact of Background Television on Parent-Child Interaction” supports that having television programming on that is intended for adults while children are around can have a negative effect. The point of this research was to study the impact of television as background noise during parent-child interaction and compare the quality and quantity of that interaction when the television was on or off. The study shows that a third of children under the age of three are usually present when parents are either watching mature content or just have the television on without actually sitting down to pay attention. This is viewed as a distraction for both the parents and children when they should be spending quality time together. The researchers look at television as background noise, specifically, as a bad background noise, in comparison to having other media playing in the background such as music, which have shown positive effects. Further, this study only focuses on adult-themed content instead of children’s programming as background noise. According to the article, when children are playing with toys in the living room, parents should not have their television shows playing because the results show that children tend to play for shorter amounts of time than if the television was off. This is due to the fact that parents are not as involved in the child’s play when the television is on. This is more a problem from the parents’ side than the child’s because the parents are too distracted by the program that’s playing.

The more involved the parents are in the activities of the child, the more that child thrives. The article states that,

“the mere presence of parents, although certainly important, does not produce optimum conditions for development. Rather, children flourish when parents are actively involved in their children’s play. In an experiment by Slade (1987), toddlers exhibited substantially longer play episodes and more sophisticated play when mothers made suggestions and were physically involved compared to when mothers only passively commented on child-initiated verbal interactions” (Kirkorian & Pempek 2009, p. 1351).

This is significant because it shows that when adults view television it indirectly has a negative effect on their children. This can be just as bad as children themselves watching their own programs.

In comparison to the study done by Gentzhow and Shapiro, who found that television could have positive benefits on the development of a child depending on the types of programs they are watching, this study shows that television can have negative long-term effects on children. The researchers believe that this is not due to the programs that children are watching, but because watching television leads to less social interaction. In order for children’s minds to flourish and develop, social interactions, especially with parents, are extremely important. Watching television or interacting with media in general takes away from that crucial time in the child’s life. They don’t blame the children in this case, but the parents because of the fact that parents choose to engage with their television shows during a time when it is important for children to play and develop their behavioral skills.

Toward the end of the article, the author notes that the results of this experiment might drastically differ if the television shows that were playing during the child’s play

time were directed at the child. This would most likely distract the child from his or her playtime because it was something that was of interest to them. Regardless of whom the program was directed at, however, the results point out the fact that watching less television during early childhood will keep children completely focused on more important activities that will positively develop their brains.

Chapter 4 Parenting & Television

No matter what the popular opinion about media is, the fact is that the momentum of various platforms is not going to fade away anytime soon. It is a huge part of most people's lives even if there is a negative view of its effects on children. Most people began watching television from infancy and grew up with it as a part of their daily lives. "Rising number of parents install television sets in their infants' bedroom, and significant percentages of parents report using television deliberately, such as to calm, educate, and socialize their young children" (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2006). Now more than ever there are growing forms of media. Television is not the only platform that offers programming. Children are on YouTube, social media, streaming sites and more. Therefore, it is important to understand its impact on western society today. A recent study by Amy I. Nathanson and Uttara Manohar (2012) looks at how college students plan to incorporate television into their future parenting methods. The study found that the majority of college students think that television can have positive effects on young children and that they plan to use it as a way of parenting.

Should media be a tool used for parenting and can it have positive long-term effects on children? This can be difficult to answer because those who believe that media can be educational and help develop the social skills of children may not always recognize huge part of the media industry is advertisements. This can have a negative effect in the way people perceive things. In an article titled, "The Interrelationships between Television Viewing, Values and Perceived Well-Being: A Global Perspective," Sandra K. Smith Speck and Abhijit Roy state that the average American spends about

15% of their lives watching television. This is a huge portion of one's life being influenced by the things they are exposed to through a screen and advertisements. A lot of the programs we see on television serve no other purpose than to sell a specific lifestyle to their viewers. More often than not, this kind of lifestyle is not ideal and is completely unrealistic. Most of these advertisements influence people to buy things they do not need in order to try to reach a certain level of life and self-satisfaction that may not ever be achievable. Many people can look back on their childhoods and remember all the things they wanted to buy in order to please them and impress their friends. These material things were most likely advertised on television, and now they are advertised on several platforms. Speck and Roy (2008) state that, “television influences viewers and their values both through its programming and through its advertising. Indeed, television programming content is closely linked to the goals of marketers; rather than television programs being sold to viewers, viewers are sold to advertisers at a price per 1000 consumers” (Speck & Roy 2008, p. 1215). This shows that those in the media industry are not always keeping the interest of viewers in mind. They are just looking to make money off their viewers by selling a lifestyle to them. The goal of media is not always just to entertain, but also often to influence. Unfortunately, children are very easily influenced so while it is okay for them to use different forms of media, parents should heavily monitor all programs and consumption should be limited.

Chapter 5 Adolescents & Television

Too much media is bad for you, but that is not a new idea. Most people are aware of the obvious negative effects of having too much screen time. People are even aware of the fact that the vast majority of media is meant to advertise specific lifestyles and material things. We must also give credit to young people in that they are also aware of this fact. Even though most children watch their screens hours on end, they are still aware that the lifestyles and behaviors of characters in popular shows and programs are unrealistic.

In the article, “The Writers Are Getting Kind of Desperate”: Young Adolescents, Television, and Literacy,” JoEllen Fisherkeller describes how some adolescents view the lifestyles of characters portrayed in media as silly. After interviewing eight different children about why they like watching fictional television shows, Fisherkeller came to the conclusion that most adolescents are aware that television shows are not always realistic. They look at these shows as another form of storytelling. They acknowledge the fact that every show has a specific story line and most importantly, there is a certain structure to each story. She writes, “these young adolescents are not watching TV mindlessly, passively absorbing the contents, as is commonly perceived in debates and research. On the contrary, these quotes demonstrate that they are aware that people construct TV, and that TV constructors work within certain kinds of constraints. Likewise, their comments suggest that they have learned, informally, some of the rules of constructing and delivering TV material” (Fisherkeller 2000, p. 602). This is in direct contrast with how many people believe that children who watch hours of television try to imitate the

lifestyles of their favorite characters. Fisherkeller's study on the effects of watching television in children is different than most in that she does not just rely on numbers and statistics to give her results. She visited each child's home and got to know it personally. She interviewed each child, and his/her family members, and she watched television with them in order to come to a conclusion about how television has affected their lives.

While there may be children who do in fact try to imitate characters they see on screen, this study supports that children are still aware that a lot of the storylines are fake and unrealistic. One of the girls that Fisherkeller interviewed explains why she does not like a certain character in a television show she watches. She explains that the show as a whole is "all too farfetched" and that one of the girls on the show is "too nice, well, she's just like, she's so nice she can't possibly exist" (Fisherkeller 2000, p. 601). While discussing talk shows, another girl states, "like we all know people like that really exist, but we don't want to know, you know? And that's why they put them on these shows. 'Cause they do get the ratings, you know? They get the number one" (Fisherkeller 2000, p. 601). Both comments prove that kids do know that television is meant to entertain and get as many views as possible. It is not always a portrayal of real life. The second comment shows that the girl knows that the more outrageous a situation on television is the more viewers it will receive. All the children that were interviewed by Fisherkeller can agree on one thing: television for them is a form of entertainment and nothing more. Based on their responses to the questions about how they feel about television, it is safe to assume that not everyone experiences negative long-term effects from watching television.

Conclusion

Based on my research, media does not always have negative long-term effects on children, but instead it can often be a savior. We need to acknowledge that children are just as aware as adults that television shows are unrealistic and even shows that are advertised as “reality” are unrealistic portrayals of real life. Children recognize that media follows a specific formula in order to pique the interest of its viewers.

At a very young age, sometimes it can even be a good thing to have children watch educational programs in order to teach them behavioral and social skills. There are shows such as *Sesame Street* that have a strong positive impact on children by teaching them reading and critical thinking skills before they even begin school. There are also platforms like the History Channel or National Geographic that children enjoy watching while at the same time they learn new things about the world around them.

It is clear that the digital age is here to stay and instead of viewing it as a negative impact on children’s lives we should instead use it as a positive thing from which children can learn. Unlike in the past, we now have a lot of options and control over which programs we watch or let our kids interact with, and when they can or can’t have screen time, so we should use that to our advantage.

Cultivation Theory was originally developed based on television only, but as media and the digital age develop it is important to think about Cultivation Theory in terms of various platforms. Children of all backgrounds now have much easier access to media, and screen time is at an all-time high so the way they view the world should be closely studied.

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