

Mainstreaming
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Abstract For Masters

Mainstreaming

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This thesis paper accompanying a research-creation video essay titled “Mainstreaming,” explores the impact of news consumption on individual’s worldviews, drawing primarily on Cultivation Theory by George Gerbner. The project explores cultivation deeply, especially the concepts of mainstreaming, the Mean World Syndrome, and resonance, while challenging some established notions and deterministic aspects of the theory. Employing a diverse range of methods, such as survey, interviews, and an experiment, the project focuses on four individuals, three categorized as politically left-leaning, and one categorized as alt-right in their news consumption profiles. The interviews of these subjects explore how these individuals actively curate their news intake and how the lived realities of these individuals do, or do not, come against the narratives of their media. Through experiment, the three left-leaning individuals were asked to alter their news consumption habits, revealing an active reinforcement and justification of their typical media. The analysis of the interviews and experiment leads to a reinterpretation of cultivation’s resonance. By establishing a difference between resonance that is more concrete versus abstract, the argument is made that lived experiences that are grounded in a subject’s lived reality serve as a means of preventing or limiting the effect of cultivation. The interview and analysis of the alt-right individual provides a case study in cultivation mainstreaming, highlighting a convergence in worldviews between him and the media that he consumes. The project overall suggests that individuals are not passive receivers of media’s messaging, and advocates for utilizing agency in the consumption of media.

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Note

This paper accompanies a research-creation video essay titled “Mainstreaming.” It is highly recommended to watch that video first to understand the full context, as this paper contains deeper explanations, justifications, and further explorations of the content and methods seen within the video.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Project

Following this introductory section, this thesis paper will first explore the project's form of research creation, then provide a review of the theoretical framework of Cultivation Theory, the primary theoretical focus of the project, explaining its key concepts of mainstreaming, the Mean World Syndrome, and resonance. Then, I present the methodology used in the project, detailing survey, interviews, and an experiment. Discussion of the findings follows, where I draw connections between the video essay's analysis, the literature, and explore further the conclusions of the video essay. Finally, the conclusion of this paper will summarize the project's contributions and suggest avenues for future research.

1.1 A New(s) Syndrome

It was a high school civics class—or perhaps it was philosophy, or even a communications course?—where I first learned about a concept called the Mean World Syndrome. The concept was simple: those who are exposed to messages of violence in the media that they consume start to think that the world is more violent than it actually is. For nearly twenty years this concept has followed me, and it has altered how I look at people's actions and reactions differently. A family member getting riled up at the dinner table about trans athletes: well, that's the Mean World Syndrome! A friend blaming their unemployed status on immigrants stealing their jobs: Mean World Syndrome. A general sense of dread, worry, fear, and anxiety about the state of the world? Well... the geopolitical climate has certainly shifted considerably since this project's inception in 2022. Suffice to say, the Mean World Syndrome has been a favorite theory of mine for decades. But the syndrome was only a start, and in learning that it was a part of a greater theoretical framework, I established a basis for this research creation project. I had a strong feeling I knew where so many of these feelings were stemming from, and that one kind of media was a major source of the syndrome: the news.

The news is an integral part of many people's lives. It is important, it is how we stay informed and up to date on the goings on in the world. But what is the balance between being informed and being overwhelmed with information? For years, I grappled with this, for the news used to play a significant role in my life. My family got the morning paper delivered every day; three of them even, at one point I remember, for some reason. I wrote articles that were published in the local town paper. I even went to school to study Television – Broadcasting, where I fell in love with directing live news broadcasts. But as part of that program, I learned specifically how broadcast news was made. At one point we were tasked with producing a roughly three-minute “in-the-field” news piece, featuring a reporter and commentary from off-the-street people, every one or two weeks. This exercise was extremely challenging, because it's one thing to just report on a news event, and another to play journalist and seek out things to report on. Quickly, anything and everything mildly interesting could be considered a news story. A new school group teaching indigenous drumming techniques? That's a great news story! Frequent delays in the bus system? News story. Vending machine broken? Technically, still a news story. We started producing content to fill a quota, rather than create anything meaningful. Now, this program was not a journalism program by any means, it was practical based, but I began to see how our experiences could also be reflected in the actions of the mainstream news. They too so often produce content by any means, just at a significantly larger scale; we struggled with making one video a week, yet as we know the twenty-four-hour news cycle exists. I noticed from news creators a willingness to make an issue out of something rather than go and report on

a real problem. In learning how the news was made, I became disillusioned with it, and thus I started to consume as little news as possible.

With this new paradigm, the issue I faced as the years went on was that this disillusionment bordered on apathy. An apathy that came at a cost. I lost a connection to the flow of information in the world, and I simply became less informed. And while I took great strides to not let myself be as affected by the news, I was still being affected by how affected everyone else was. In an era of political turmoil (what era isn't though), of the increasing threat of "fake news" and a shift in the value of "truth" in society, of the power of social media, and the uprooting of traditional institutions of journalism, the news, whatever that was, was becoming important in never-before-seen ways. And so, I became increasingly concerned with the ways that news consumption could shape our perceptions of reality and shape what we deemed important or not. Just how much can the news affect us? This is what I wanted to explore through this research-creation project.

1.2 On the Video Essay's Contents

At one point, I learned that the Mean World Syndrome that I was so captivated by is a part of a greater theoretical framework called Cultivation Theory, and this theory became my primary focus towards an epistemological exploration of news media. In the video essay I explain and exposit upon Cultivation Theory, and then I use interviews and an experiment component to engage in critical analysis focused on a specific aspect in cultivation called mainstreaming. To note, these interviews were conducted in the summer and fall of 2024, and thus they are situated expressly within that post-covid, pre-Trump-2 time period. After explaining what cultivation is, I establish the news profiles of three individuals who are identifiably left leaning and who all hail from my hometown of Kemptville, Ontario. Kemptville is in a staunchly conservative riding both provincially and federally, but from living and working there for decades I felt confident I could find individuals who fit the criteria of a habitual, heavy news consumer with strong emotional ties to topics in their news, and from a wide range of political orientations; this confidence was sorely tested in execution.

Following the establishment of their news profiles, I ask these individuals to conduct an experiment to alter their news consumption habits entirely. One was asked to consume only right-leaning news media, another to consume only far-left and far-right news media, and the third to abstain from news altogether. Their responses to this experiment were then compared against each other. Following them are selects from an interview with a distinctly alt-right individual whose persona was anonymized in the video to hide their identity. I then compared the responses of the first three against the responses of the alt-right individual, to draw conjecture on the levels of mainstreaming they are each subjected to from their news consumption.

1.3 Research Questions

As is very common in research creation, this project went through many iterative changes before landing on the final version of a video essay. The original conception for this project was as a documentary film where I wished to explore what the purpose of news was and how much of an impact news media can have on people's dispositions. Feelings, emotions, and affect were major factors of the project originally and this conformed the direction of the interviews, experiment component, and initial research focus.

My original research questions were:

- Can the consumption of news media that is situated politically opposite to that which one normally consumes (aka, alternative news media) meaningfully affect the dispositions of individuals towards topics discussed in or out of that media?
 - o And what does this tell us about the effects of cultivation?

I was also operating with a hypothesis for this research question that was integral to the direction the project initially took. The hypothesis was:

- Exposure to alternative news media cannot meaningfully change a person's held beliefs but rather can alter their emotional response to certain topics.

Ultimately, I was unable to prove or disprove this hypothesis with just the subjects and media I had found. This resulted in me moving away from a documentary film format and more towards analytical analysis of the content I had procured. With this, my original research question was forgone, and I created a new one that I sought to pursue in this analytical analysis:

- Are the subjects of these interviews subjected to cultivation mainstreaming? And if so, how much?

This question is explored with an attempted answer directly in the video essay.

Chapter 2: Introduction to the Form

This project is considered research creation. The video essay that accompanies this paper is the creative output of the research. Chapman and Sawchuk give an excellent explanation of this form, defining research creation as the integration of a creative process with an artistic work as part of a study project (6). They further elucidate on four subcategories of research creation projects: “research-for-creation,” “research-from-creation,” “creative presentations of research,” and finally “creation-as-research” (16). Importantly, in most of these subcategories Chapman and Sawchuk mention them being iterative processes (15–19). Iteration was extremely prevalent in this project at all stages, from the original idea of a more traditional documentary focused heavily on the subjects, to a more hybrid documentary exploring the concept of news media, to eventually the video essay, and several other variations in between. Each iteration served as a base for the next iteration. For example, I never sought out to do the kind of analysis present in the video essay, so without building to that iteration of the project I would likely never have drawn that line of analytical thinking.

In the original conception of this project, I sought to employ specifically research-for-creation as a methodological focus. My research methods, to be explored further here in its own section, included gathering survey data, conducting interviews, and executing an experiment, all of which was then to be presented in the form of a documentary film, to be the artistic work. Interestingly, through the iterative process of the development of the output of my research I feel that I have in fact explored three of these four subcategories of research creation, with even some argument towards the fourth. My justification for each is as follows:

The video essay employs the subcategory method of “creative presentations of research.” Unlike the original documentary film, the video essay-style piece serves as more of a pedagogical tool, at least that was my intention for it. I felt that my attempts to make complex theoretical concepts more accessible to a wider audience using talking-head narration and artistic animations did not fit the style and form of a traditional documentary film. This also led me to engage in deeper analysis and interpretation of the content using my own words. Originally, the documentary was to use mostly the words of the subjects in conversation with each other without my overt commentary in between.

The documentary did exist at one point though mostly in “assembly” or very rough-cut forms; the interviews sections are pulled from that version though heavily truncated. This iterative design is just what is described as “research-for-creation” by Chapman and Sawchuk, where one piece of creative research informs and iterates into another (16–18). If I had not cut together the interviews as I had for the documentary format, I possibly would not have landed on the critical analysis of the content the way I did in the video essay.

And then for the fourth subcategory “creation-as-research,” it is described as “projects where creation is required in order for research to emerge” (Chapman and Sawchuk 19). I used the documentary’s content and specific method of intercutting the interviews to pull from, which then allowed for the research in the video essay to emerge. And, to a lesser extent even, the deeper analysis in this paper employs that as well, stemming from the video essay which was somewhat constrained in breadth of exposition. Though this is less solid than the other three subcategories.

As for the format of the video essay itself, I drew from my years of video production experience and education in broadcasting – television, scriptwriting, and my Communication

Studies production courses. The format was somewhat inspired by the works of several YouTuber creators who produce video essay content, who often synthesize complex theoretical concepts into formats that are digestible by a general audience, while also incorporating analytical research and analysis, interviews, as well as personal commentary. One such creator is Derek Muller, otherwise known as Veritasium on YouTube, who is a popular science creator who uses interspersed animations to better illustrate complex concepts. Muller aka Veritasium's videos are usually hyper-focused on one topic and are framed as both instructional yet also as a personal exploration into that one topic. This is precisely what I tried to do with my video essay, and while I did not seek out to emulate him directly, in watching his videos now there are some stylistic similarities. Another creator is Lindsay Ellis who produces video essay-style content that is far more commentary based. Some of her videos feature more of herself in them which helped me shape the method of self-insertion I tried to have in my video. For Veritasium, and for some of Ellis' videos especially, they walk the line between an academic research paper and an entertainment video, deeply exploring topics and weaving strong research through personal commentary and investigation.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

2.1 Original Literature

This project has a hyper-focused mono-theoretical perspective. In the original conception of the project, in the documentary format, there was a wider array of theories that were being applied. As the project moved to video essay, to keep the content focused I decided to exclusively explore Cultivation Theory and base the theoretical framework off just that. I wanted to make the video an extensive exploration of one theory, rather than try and bring in other theories that, while potentially aptly suited to reinforce my analysis and findings, would have made the video much more theoretically dense. Another part of this justification was that, even then there were many, arguably very important aspects of cultivation that were not being explored in the video, else the video would be twice as long as it is; most of these ignored aspects are mentioned in the video at the end. There are also other theories that are mentioned at the end of the video, but there was no significant deep dive or literature review done for those, just enough to confirm the connections mentioned. It is still worth noting some of the initial theoretical research that was done, as it did play a role in the conceptual development and initial iterations of the project.

2.1.1 Affect Theory

As mentioned, the project was at one point much more focused on emotional engagement to news media, and Affect Theory was to be the theoretical perspective to further explore this. Affect Theory being a popular and widely used theory in communications and beyond means it has an extremely diverse and broad literature to pull from. There appears to be a general resistance to “box-in” affect and quantify it as a “theory” though, and a lot of the literature seems to reflect that. Andrew Murphie in “Fielding Affect” denotes affect’s resistance to being institutionalized and “packaged,” giving eighteen points discussing why this is the case, and how the very nature of affect “suggests that [it] is perhaps not best pursued as [a] territorial quest for a delimited field” (Murphie 4). As such, the many voices who speak of affect are all talking of the same “thing,” but each in extraordinarily different and diverse ways. In conversation with each other and yet, to some degree, at odds with each other. Sarah Ahmed’s “Sticky Affects” explores how affect can stick with objects due to certain associations (Gregg et al. 30–33). This could be an excellent alternate theory to explore the “abstract resonance” concept that I establish in the video. Repeatedly associating negative affects with particular groups or issues, news media contributes to the ‘stickiness’ of these feelings with people, either in the absence of direct personal experience or in the face of it. When the project was exploring what the purpose of news was, I considered incorporating Lauren Berlant’s Cruel Optimism form of affect. In the opening paragraph Berlant describes Cruel Optimism as “when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially” (1). In the context of this project, this would have explored how, despite causing us such anxiety, the aim of news to be informed. And as Berlant continues, “... subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being” explaining why we develop an almost dependency on the news (24). This exploration of affect, while interesting, did not seem particularly applicable to later iterations of the project. Overall, Affect Theory is a very broad and extensive field of study. The one loss I regret is how I was going to attempt to reinterpret the “effects” of Cultivation Theory instead as “affects” through Affect Theory, but I digress.

2.1.2 News Media Polarization

I did some preliminary research into news media polarization, and in the documentary version of the project this was to have a much greater focus. In the video essay, things are presented very binary, with the subjects on the left being labeled as such largely due to how strongly on the right the other subject is by comparison. There is more nuance to the subject's political leanings than is presented in this video, and this section of research was going to be used to explore this. This needed to be dropped due to the scope of the video essay.

What I explored originally was the divide between “left” and “right” sources of news, and how this has become a reality of the news media landscape, even used as a signifier of what is truthful or what can be trusted. For example, the labeling of sources as “woke” by conservatives and/or the right-leaning is an increasingly used tactic to decry messaging as being untrustworthy (Major). This would have been very relevant in expanded discussion surrounding the video's alt-right subject. Hilariously, in the proposal for this project I had a line that said “fact checking has become a growing concern and effort on social media, and it has been criticized for “unfairly” targeting or being weaponized towards people and news sources on the right” (Stencel). Since then, Facebook has completely removed fact checking, and “Community Notes” on X/Twitter are a dubiously reliable substitute for it on that platform (Oxford; Drolsbach et al.). Research on the polarization of western news media has been conducted for decades, going back into the mid 20th century. Now though, with the internet and social media firmly supplanting broadcast television in popularity, a renewed and shifted perspective in this research has arisen (Shearer). For example, as early as 2008 a study found “greater partisan filtering” of potential news sources on the web compared to that of television (Baum and Groeling 345). Today traditional media is deeply intertwined with social media, and in this light, more research and a stronger definition on what polarization even is today may be required (Kubin and von Sikorski). In the context of the video essay, almost all the subjects consumed their news via the web, but I never deemed this significant enough to analyze further.

2.2 Cultivation Theory

Developed in the 1960s by Hungarian-born, American communications scholar George Gerbner (1919-2005), Cultivation Theory primarily explored the effects of heavy television viewing on individuals (Nabi and Riddle 328). These effects were explored through examining fictional primetime television dramas, focused “at the macrolevel of broad scale institutional practices” as Potter puts it (“A Critical Analysis of Cultivation Theory” 1017). The “cultivation hypothesis” posits that long-term and extensive exposure to media causes individuals to develop worldviews that mimic the messages in the content that they are exposed to (Morgan and Shanahan, “The State of Cultivation” 338). Gerbner's methodology involved something called “Message System Analysis,” a systematic content analysis of television programming to identify recurring themes and messages across primetime television. To do this, Gerbner created something he called the Cultural Indicators Message System Databank (CIMSD), which was a collection of data gathered from weeks of primetime television dramas, looking for consistent patterns. For the purposes of this project, while I elected to not create a CIMSD, I make the argument that the message siloing that occurs with politically polarized news media creates a kind of CIMSD where consistent messaging can be identified and pulled from.

For the video essay I focused on Cultivation Theory in a rather broad sense, and there are many aspects of Cultivation Theory that I outright ignore or do not utilize due to the scope of the

project. I did apply some of these concepts in the analysis, just without naming them to save them from overloading the viewer of the essay with more theoretical concepts. First and second order effects describe how an individual's behavior first changes when exposed to media, and then secondly how their attitudes and beliefs change after. The accessibility principle (or model) is the viewer's ability to recall things they saw in the media, and institutional process analysis explores how messages are disseminated through media institutions (L. J. Shrum). In a larger scale project, each of these aspects would be instrumental to fully executing cultivation analysis.

Cultivation Theory is not without its criticism, and being aware of its historically denoted shortcomings is important, especially considering its lesser use in communication studies today. Scholars such as James W. Potter have written extensive critical analysis on cultivation, with a commonly cited issue of the theory being the lack of agency that Gerbner gives the viewers of media ("A Critical Analysis of Cultivation Theory" 1022). As far as Gerbner is concerned, heavy consumers of a given media are subjected to cultivation no matter what. This is a highly determinist stance that begs for some added nuance in modernity. As Potter explains, simply shifting the "meaning locus" towards the receivers, as many have done in the continued application of cultivation, allows for a greater breadth in use of the theory ("A Critical Analysis of Cultivation Theory" 1022). In this project I believe I attempted to do this, both in the video essay and further in this paper. Additionally, as far as Gerbner is concerned, television content is this monolithic block of media, and many factors such as genre nuances, narrative structures, and potential viewer interpretation of the content of the media are not factored in (Newcomb; Hawkins and Pingree). If a programme had violence in it, then to Gerbner it contributed to the cultivation of a heavy viewer's perception of the violent state of the world, regardless of the individual's interpretation of that violence. Potter also criticizes the lack of studies done at the time using cultivation which look at content such as news ("A Critical Analysis of Cultivation Theory" 1025).

These criticisms are important especially in the context of this project. In today's fragmented media landscape, with the countless possible streams of information, identifying any kind of "monolithic block of media" as it might have existed in the second half of the twentieth century is virtually impossible. Additionally, Cultivation Theory is meant to be applied at the macro level, using questionnaire and survey to explore large scale trends over years. While Gerbner did not explicitly denounce the use of micro-level analysis, nor the use of experiment for that matter, the conception of the theory is heavily macro-focused. Gerbner's collaborators and other scholars have attempted to apply cultivation in more micro-level focused ways over the years (Morgan and Shanahan, "Two Decades of Cultivation Research"). Overall, Cultivation Theory is a somewhat technologically determinist theory that places too much power in the hands of the media, yet despite this shortcoming I believe it can still be used to great effect to explore media effects today bearing these shortcomings in mind.

2.3 Mainstreaming

A core concept within Cultivation Theory, Mainstreaming is the convergence of attitudes and beliefs—aka worldviews—amongst heavy television viewers. Through mainstreaming, heavy television consumers develop a shared perception of reality that mimics the worldview of the media that they consume (Gerbner et al., "Charting the Mainstream"). Importantly, individual differences between the heavy consumers are overwritten by the media, as everyone is mainstreamed into a similar reflection of what they consume; you are what you eat, so to speak. Most interestingly, Gerbner and his cohort found a degree of convergence in attitudes and beliefs

that cross the political divide. Heavy consumers of television would all begin to converge in their answers and attitudes: liberals, moderates, conservatives would begin to answer far more similarly if they were heavy television consumers (Gerbner et al., “Charting the Mainstream,” figs.3–4). Even more interestingly, this convergence typically trended towards more conservative values. Through message system analysis, Mainstreaming was identified through so called “television answers” from individuals (Gerbner et al., “Growing up with Television”). These were responses from people that aligned with the worldviews presented in television programming. For example, liberal respondents would suddenly shoot up in their favor towards laws against intermarriage if they were a heavy television consumer, comparatively to their light viewer counterparts (Gerbner et al., “Charting the Mainstream,” fig.3).

Again though, it is important to understand that Gerbner’s original studies were conducted when there was a dramatically different media landscape to today. There was a miniscule number of television stations that a given person could watch at any given time—stations did not even run for twenty-four hours at that point. Creating a Cultural Indicators Message System Databank, a collection of common themes and messages recorded from across primetime television dramas at the time, was, by no means trivial, significantly easier to do than it would be today. In the context of this project, the argument is made that the homogeneity of yesteryear’s television exists still in the ideological silos of politically sorted news media.

2.4 The Mean World Syndrome

The Mean World Syndrome is perhaps the most well-known aspect of Cultivation Theory. As stated previously, it is the tendency of heavy television viewers to perceive the world as more dangerous or violent than it actually is. But the Mean World Syndrome can be used to encompass a broader sense of distrust, cynicism, and anxiety about the state of the world that is instilled upon people from the media they consume. It's crucial to understand that the Mean World Syndrome is not solely about a realized belief of something (i.e., “crime rates are high!”) it encompasses emotional and attitude components. Heavy viewers do not just think the world is more dangerous: they feel more vulnerable and anxious about the state of the world, which can influence their perceptions on other things too. For example, as Gerbner et al. explains, this cultivated fear can lead to a variety of behavioral consequences, such as increased support for “tough on crime” policies, a greater willingness to accept authoritarian measures in the name of security, and a general sense of helplessness and alienation in the face of this worldview (Gerbner et al., “Growing up with Television”).

In the context of this project, the Mean World Syndrome serves as a starting point for exploring the broader affective consequences of news consumption. While the project does not focus on violence, it examines to a degree how news media, through its selection and framing of stories, can cultivate a sense of unease, anxiety, and emotional distress, even in the absence of direct personal experience with the issues being reported. Essentially, the Mean World Syndrome demonstrates that media can shape not just our understanding of the world, but also our response—physical, emotional, or otherwise—to the world as we are presented it.

2.5 Resonance

Resonance is a crucial concept within Cultivation Theory that explains why some individuals are more susceptible to the effects of cultivation than others. Resonance is an amplification of the impact of media messages when the messages align with or “resonate” more with an individual's real-world experiences. In essence, resonance occurs when the “television

world" and the "real world" converge, thus giving someone a "double dose" of the message as Gerbner puts it (Gerbner and Gross). For example, a person who lives in a high-crime neighborhood and watches a lot of crime-related television is likely to experience stronger cultivation effects than someone who lives in a low-crime area. The media messages about violence are reinforced by their personal experiences, making the perceived threat seem more immediate and relevant to their person. Similarly, someone who has been a victim of a crime might be more susceptible to the Mean World Syndrome after viewing violent media content, because that content will dramatically resonate with them more. Resonance adds an important layer of nuance to Cultivation Theory. It somewhat, though not completely, acknowledges that the effects of media are not as uniform and wholly dominating (or determinist) as the other parts of the theory might suggest. Though Gerbner seems to only position resonance as it amplifies cultivation, rather than potentially having any opposite effects. Regardless, it establishes within the theory that individual experiences do play a role in shaping how we interpret and respond to messages. It highlights an important dynamic between the media world and the lived world.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This project went through several large iterative changes due to the nature of the production and outlining how the project evolved from conception to finished product is important, as each iteration influenced the project going forward. In the original conception of the project, I was focused on the emotional impact of news media and the importance that people gave to given social issues—their disposition towards a topic. Through the project’s development this shifted first towards a greater focus on the “purpose of news” for habitual news consumers, until eventually landing on a focus in synthesis and reinterpretation of the concept of resonance from Cultivation Theory.

3.1 News Sources Gathering

I needed to affirm my understanding of the possible differences between sources of news. Before I began anything, I familiarized myself with different news sources on the left, right, far right, and far left. Where a news source falls on the political spectrum can be an important factor in whether someone will consider not only trusting it, but whether someone will even consider viewing it at all (Kubin and von Sikorski). I did this to get a sense of things such as the source’s frequency of content, the types of content they produced, and to affirm or deny any preconceived notions I had about the sources. I used several websites to help facilitate this, such as mediabiasfactcheck.com, adfontesmedia.com, groundnews.com, and allsides.com, which claim to offer a degree of nonpartisan identification of media bias and truthfulness. These sites give an extensive explanation as to how they determine the political leaning of a given source, and what biases they might present. A direct result of this was my new familiarization with many sources that could be considered on the “far left,” resulting in me finding news sites I had never heard of before. I eventually used this to develop a list of sources that was used further in the project during the experiment portion.

3.2 Expert Interviews

Stemming from this I conducted interviews with Concordia University journalism professors Paul Gott and Francine Pelletier. Though I did not use these interviews in the video, their responses were integral to shaping my understanding of the “purpose” of news media. Importantly, they helped shape the assertion I make in the video that, in the political divide of news media, exists a kind of message sorting akin to what George Gerbner used in creating his Cultural Indicators Message System Databank. Also not used in the video was an interview I conducted with Dr. David Shannahan, editor of the North Grenville Times, a small-town newspaper. Dr. Shannahan helped me develop a greater understanding of the value and importance of local news. He also gave me several possible leads and avenues to pursue in the other sections of the project, such as where to distribute my survey flier.

3.3 Survey

To find my interview subjects for this project, I used the method of survey. I indicated that responses to the survey may be used illustratively in the documentary, but without any personal information. The main purpose of the survey was to find people to interview. To distribute this survey, I printed fliers (see appendix) designed to look like a news story webpage, containing a written link to the survey hosted directly on my personal website. The flier also had a QR code containing the same link. This survey consisted of ten questions designed to construct an initial news profile of the respondent, which I could then use to gauge the viability of the

person for further participation. The questions in the “News Consumption” section of the survey can also be found in the appendix.

The flier was also printed as a large poster. These fliers and the posters were distributed around my hometown of Kemptville Ontario, at local businesses and places of work. Friends and family members took copies of the flier and poster and distributed them too. I produced a short video advertisement version of the flier which I posted on social media and that was shared by friends and family, though this was shockingly ineffective and resulted in virtually zero uptick in responses.

There was an initial technical difficulty with the survey, where someone had managed to crash the page that it was hosted on by putting some unexpected information into one of the personal information boxes. This issue might have accounted for an unknowable loss of potential responses, as it went unnoticed for almost a day, right at the beginning, after the survey was distributed around.

After roughly a month in circulation the survey had gathered ninety recorded responses. This was somewhat below my expectations, but it was certainly enough to work with at the time. The survey results were:

- YES, to participate in the experiment:
 - 9 left leaning
 - 1 right leaning
 - 8 consuming all types of media
- MAYBE, to participate in the experiment:
 - 24 left leaning
 - 4 right leaning
 - 18 consuming all types of media
- NO, to participate in the experiment:
 - 10 left leaning
 - 2 right leaning
 - 1 center leaning
 - 16 consuming all types of media
 - 1 did not answer question

As can be seen, the responses from right, left, and those who say they consume all types of media was very unbalanced. More insight into this will follow, but at this stage I was concerned that the places that I had left the flier at was a major cause for this disparagement. It was possible that the businesses or establishments did not attract a diverse enough clientele. In hindsight, a greater methodological misstep may have been the technological aspect of the survey, which may explain the lower responses from certain political demographic groups. For example, my father took the flier and gave it to everyone in his men’s choir group, which consists of almost all men sixty years or older. Of the twenty plus men, a very small number filled out the survey, all of whom were the youngest members of the group.

3.4 Initial Interview

Using the survey responses, I contacted many of the people who indicated either YES or MAYBE to wanting to participate in the experiment component via email or via phone call. I was specifically looking for individuals who indicated they were habitual or heavy consumers of

news, and who lived in the town of Kemptville. I had correspondence with nine individuals to setup initial interviews; two had to cancel before recording; two were too camera shy to proceed and indicated they did not want to continue on with the experiment; two more gave extremely poor interviews and thus I was not interested in continuing the experiment with them; and the remaining three were the individuals who became the focus of the video: Chassa, Cholly, and Magali. Another methodological misstep may have been not adequately indicating that the interview was to be filmed (though it was stated in the initial email quite plainly), as several of the subjects expressed some shock to me showing up with a large video recording setup.

For the interviews, I conducted them in the subject's home. The interviews were recorded single-camera style, in a location of the subject's choosing that they deemed comfortable. The line of questioning was developed from their individual responses to the survey questions, with some common questions between the three. The common lines of questioning were:

- Personal news profile
- Survey questions follow-up
- Most important social issue(s) of the day
- News source leaning quiz
- News consumption habits profile
- Experiment explanation

Chassa, Cholly, and Magali were each very comfortable in front of the camera and required little to no retakes or requests for repetition or rephrasing. This initial interview lasted approximately forty-five minutes for each interview.

3.5 Assigning the Experiment

To explore my hypothesis on the effect of alternative media consumption on an individual's dispositions and emotional engagement with their news media, I sought to use the method of experiment. The inspiration for using experiment came from two areas. The first was when researching Cultivation Theory, I wanted to focus more on the individual rather than use a macro-scale study, and I felt that an experiment was a means of practically applying cultivation's methods on a micro-scale. Stylistically, I was influenced by Nathan Fielder's docu-reality comedy series "Nathan for You" which often features experiment-like escapades with individuals to prove a hypothesis. This stylistic influence cannot be seen in the video essay.

Using the survey responses of the subject and then altering that based on any revelations in the interview, I determined the course of action I wished for them to take for the experiment. Only with Chassa did I end up changing my choice mid interview because of her answers to my questions, as it became clear she was a strong habitual consumer but was closer to the center and a moderate than I originally positioned her, and I did not wish for her to do the same experiment as Cholly. At the end of the interview, I asked each of them to do the following:

1. For Magali, I had her consume right-leaning news sources.
 - I chose this because I identified Magali as being distinctly on the left and that, because of her trepidation even with her left news sources, she would never normally choose to consume right-leaning news. She also seemed very unfamiliar with the right-leaning sources.
2. For Cholly I had him consume both far-left AND far-right leaning news sources.

- For Cholly, while he seemed moderately left leaning overall, he seemed to gravitate towards more of the middle or center as far as his news sources were concerned. Going to complete extremes was something I would never see him normally do.
 - I almost considered not having Cholly continue with the experiment as, from his interview, he seemed extremely well rounded and self-aware of his news consumption. I worried that the experiment would prove a waste of time as I felt it extremely unlikely for my original hypothesis on emotional impact to be proven with him. Thankfully, I did have him continue.
3. For Chassa I had her abstain from news consumption as much as possible.
- Placing Chassa was more difficult. She seemed relatively well rounded in her news consumption. The news occupied a significant portion of her day, because it provided her with vital information that she relied on. Taking that away completely seemed like something she would not normally be able to do.
 - This was largely a pivot in the case of Chassa, away from my original hypothesis' goal, as I was unsure how to place someone like her.

I also requested that the subjects keep a journal detailing any thoughts or experiences that they had while conducting the experiment. They were told that they would not need to share the contents of this journal directly with me, rather it would serve as a springboard of reflection in the follow-up interview.

I requested each of them to perform the experiment for as long as one month, but if they felt that they could not continue at any point they could stop and initiate the second interview. I originally chose a month as that would mean they would have gone through several news cycles. There does not seem to be much academic research on the exact length of a news cycle, with some saying that it is just “very fluid,” though other research suggests that it is typically one week (Walgrave and Van Aelst; Schema Design and Google Trends). During the experiment I kept email correspondence with each of them, and at the halfway point requested from them a one-line summary of their experience thus far.

3.6 Follow-Up Interviews

Following the experiment, I interviewed each of them again on their experiences. Still working from my original hypothesis, my line of questioning in this interview was to build from the first interview to establish any changes that might have occurred, and to have them reflect on the experiment as a whole. The subjects were asked to pull from their journals for reflection. These interviews turned conversational at times as the participants bemused on the disruptive nature of the experience. I asked each of them again about the social issues that they had mentioned in the first interview, and for all of them they responded with nothing new and had almost no follow-up commentary. I found these interviews somewhat disheartening, especially with Cholly and Magali, as they communicated that they experienced very little to no changes whatsoever. At this point, I was considering completely changing my methodological approach but ultimately decided to stay the course.

3.7 Canvassing for Another Perspective

With the interviews and experiment executed by Chassa, Cholly, and Magali, I felt that I had an adequate perspective from largely left-leaning individuals. What I was lacking entirely

was perspective from right-leaning people, and it was here where I faced my greatest methodological hurdle. What I quickly discovered was that, even if an individual indicated they were right-leaning or even center in their politics, almost no one who responded to the survey was actually very right leaning; at most, everyone was fiscally conservative and socially center. This can even be seen a bit with Chassa and Cholly, as they are mostly left leaning with some noticeable moderate/centrist outlooks. More nuance, with a deeper exploration into political polarization would have stemmed from here, regarding the interview subjects. With my survey not being adequate to sourcing people on the right, I resorted to manually investigating potential subjects via on-foot canvassing.

I executed this canvassing by going to select businesses and shops within Kemptville and speaking to owners and employees there. My reasoning being that, as Kemptville was in a distinctly conservative political riding both provincially and federally, it was likely that business owners in town would also be right leaning. Additionally, by targeting businesses such as mechanics, autobody shops, hardware stores, and other blue-collar establishments, I felt I had a greater chance of finding right-leaning individuals there; this was somewhat presumptuous and playing off generalizations, but at least in the town of Kemptville, it proved to be almost completely accurate. What my personal bias did not prepare me for was what I encountered next. Time after time, the people whom I spoke to and identified as being right-leaning news consumers either said no, were downright rude to me, or they ghosted me altogether after stating they would fill out the survey. This is slight anecdotal conjecture, but I identified a certain degree of shame coming from these people, as they started out pleasant enough, but the second that I told them what the project was about, or mentioned the experiment, their tone completely flipped. All I asked was if they were heavy news consumers and what kind of sources of news they consumed, before giving them my survey flier. For several months this exercise continued fruitlessly, until I managed to find “John.”

John was extremely interested in discussing the topic of news media with me, and he agreed to be interviewed on his habits and views with relish. Although, when I did show up with my equipment, he became sheepish and said he did not want to be filmed. I did manage to convince him to be recorded via audio only. John’s interview progressed very similarly to the initial interviews with Chassa, Cholly, and Magali, though John expanded much more on his answers to some questions than the others. It was very clear that discussing the news, especially his distrust of the mainstream news and his whole acceptance of alt-right news media, was somewhat of a passion for him. Ultimately, John did not wish to participate in the experiment portion, citing his distrust of liberal news media and not wanting to subject himself to their lies.

3.8 Material Analysis

With months of material including more than a dozen nearly hour-long interviews and hours of b-roll and other footage I began compiling the documentary in editing. What I quickly discovered was that there was just no way to adequately explore my original hypothesis. With Chassa, Cholly, and Magali, there was no identifiable change between the first and second interviews, and because John did not do the experiment portion, I did not have the opposite perspective to compare against there either. Emotion, at least in news altering dispositions towards topics aspect, seemed to be a non-factor altogether. Putting my original hypothesis aside, I began to review the footage, and I noticed patterns and themes emerge between the three left-leaning subjects together and then between those three and John. In analysis of the interviews without the original framing, I noticed things that were not apparent in the interviews before. I

also began to shift my focus away from exploring the purpose of news, and eventually away from a conventional documentary format altogether. It became clear that documentary was not the best method of delivery for this content.

I began to explore methods of greater analytical engagement with Cultivation Theory directly, that also allowed me to incorporate my own commentary and interpretations of the interviews. I felt that there was enough to be analyzed with just those four subjects, with my own words to fill in the gaps. I also needed to facilitate the anonymization of John and thus keep his section entirely on its own. As for my reasoning to anonymize John, I ended up engaging in more personal commentary towards his responses rather than letting John speak on his own in opposite to the others, as would have been more the case in the documentary. Because of my personal disagreement with his statements, anonymizing his audio was the best method rather than present it without my personal critique or condemnation.

To anonymize John, I exported his section's audio and used elevenlabs.io's AI voice changer function. The reason why this service was chosen was that it generates a new voice that maintains the original's inflection, tone, and intonation extremely closely. Before anything, I did explore open-source and locally run options but could find nothing that produced satisfactory results. There are some ethical considerations to be identified here: Elevenlabs is a commercial entity which is explicit that any input into their systems may be used for future development of the systems, and that no copyright of the media is transferred to Elevenlabs. I did not use John's audio to clone his voice; his transcription is being read by a close-sounding ai-generated voice with his original inflection. To maintain ethical consideration over the use of John's media, I made sure there was no personal identifiable information that could link John's real identity with the input audio. To me, this was necessary to anonymize John sufficiently while maintaining his personal "voice" as it was important to the character and profile of John as a subject.

3.9 Scripting and Animating the Video Essay

I began the process of scripting. Using the dozens of pages of brainstorming and voice-over writing that I had done at that point, I began to narrow my focus and compile a script. The initial drafts of this script were still heavily focused on the purpose of news and featured journalism professors Paul Gott and Francine Pelletier. I was able to pluck the interview parts of the documentary right out, truncate them, and incorporate them directly into the script via transcript. This ended up being the best method, as I could look at the interviews as their own media objects and apply analysis to them directly, rather than needing them to stand independently. This was what led me to video essay. As I began to add more analysis, and as I incorporated more of Cultivation Theory, the script began to shape into the mono-theoretical perspective that it became. I regretfully ended up having to cut the sections with the journalism professors and eliminate all discussion on news as a medium. Then through multiple drafts, and a variety of different conclusions, I came to the discussion on cultivation resonance as will be explored further in the next section.

With my script locked-in, I constructed an in-house greenscreen studio, a DIY teleprompter, and I began recording myself. From this, I separated the video into twenty-three sections and started creating animations. In the end I produced eighteen separate animated sequences as well as the title card. The animations were created in the software Blender and rendered almost entirely in Eevee with some sections in Cycles. Assets such as television sets and other objects came from the Blenderkit addon database and are all royalty free or creative

commons zero. Rendering all nineteen animated sequences took cumulatively more than seventy-two hours total on an RTX 3090 graphics card. With all the animations completed and rendered, I assembled them together with the interviews and exported the full video essay.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

Cultivation Theory is meant to be applied at the macro-level to examine trends over years. This is the exact opposite of what I have attempted in this project, which does limit some of the potential direct application of cultivation to my findings. My justification of this is to return to James W. Potter's criticism of cultivation, and his declaration to shift the meaning locus to the receivers of the message, rather than focus on the media itself ("A Critical Analysis of Cultivation Theory" 1022). I believe that to circumvent some of the deterministic nature of Cultivation Theory, focusing on the individual and their interactions with their media is the best avenue for doing so. Additionally, I must acknowledge that these findings are constrained by the limited sample size of the study that was conducted, and thus the findings must be constrained to these individuals for the most part.

Originally, I wanted this project to focus on the social issues question that I asked to the interview subjects but with a different objective; I wanted to see the ways that the responses to that question could change before and after the experiment. The idea was that if cultivation mainstreaming could occur, then the person's answer of "what is the most important social issue" could be changed to align closer to messaging from the alternative media they had to consume. Or in Chassa's case, the intensity or importance they placed in the issue could shift. The immediate finding from the experiment was just as Gerbner stated: cultivation occurs over years, not weeks. Not to mention, in struggling to find right-leaning subjects, I had no direct comparison for the experiment from the opposite political side. This caused me to shift my focus of analysis to more of a compare and contrast, and from this some interesting findings arose.

4.1 Reinforcement, not Transformation

The experiment, rather than inducing cultivation, served as a means to solidify and justify the existing news habits in the minds of the three left-leaning subjects. By exposing them to alternative or a lack of news it demonstrated that they actively curate their normal news media based on a set of pre-existing values and pragmatic needs. Cholly touches on this in the video, as he mentions specifically how disruptive the experiment was to his news consumption habits. This suggests that, at least in the short term, individuals are resistant to the effects of cultivation from alternate media if said media just does not provide them with a bare minimum that their typical media provides them. This bare minimum could be in quantity of content, style of content, or breadth of coverage. And this seems to even circumvent idealistic differences to some degree—though they were being forced to consume this media and put aside ideological differences temporarily. They each indicated in some way that the disruption was most impactful due to a lack of information, and thus a lack of perceived value in that media, which were an important detractors. To return to Gerbner for a moment, he was not so concerned with the perceived value of a media for an individual, rather he saw all of media as relatively homogenous and individual preferences of programming was not much of a factor (Gerbner and Gross 227–53). A study by L.J. Shrum did try and assert that attention and engagement with media does matter for cultivation to occur, so there is some support to suggest that this is not an isolated factor (L. Shrum). Here, each subject identifies an important value in their typical media and then uses that to justify their habits.

Chassa indicated an anxiety she feels from the lack of news, as without it she does not feel as informed about the goings on around her. These goings on around her though became very focused on the local, rather than global, as several anxiety-inducing events happened during

the progress of the experiment. Given that this experiment happened to take place during a string of lockdown events at her children's school, not having the news had a real impact in her ability to know how this was developing. Other possible conjecture from this is that in cutting off the "barrage of information", as she puts it, she became much more insular, and her sphere of focus became significantly more narrowed to her immediate. An equilibrium for her was then found as she relished in this lack of beratement, yet she still indicated a willingness to return to her typical news habits with some modifications.

Cholly repeatedly indicated how useless he found the extreme news sources in providing him actual news, indicating that they did not even provide the bare minimum of journalistic information. To Cholly, he found the experience to be laughable, and he even stated that the far-left news sources were even more useless than the ones on the right, citing a lack of content. This was an interesting observation, as I had not factored in the lower frequency of posting from the far-left-leaning sites to be so detrimental. But for someone who checked the news every single day and multiple times throughout that day, such a miniscule amount of content was completely unsatisfactory. This, while not mentioned in the video essay for the sake of time, could have been a major point of exploration in the deafferenting effects of each political side of news; one just makes more than the other. For Magali, her experiment experience resulted in an even greater reduction in her news consumption, due to her finding that the alternate news did not provide her with a wide enough worldview for her to be informed. Magali is from France, and she indicated her parents live there currently, so a more globalist perspective is an utterly essential and bare-minimum requirement for her news. The impact on her mental health cannot be understated either, causing her to prioritize her well-being over receiving any information regardless of how narrow it may be. She just found that the right-leaning sites were considerably more depressing.

At the risk of getting into speculation, the reasons for Cholly and Magali's rejection of the opposite news could also be inferred as a possible reason for why John refused to participate in the experiment. John has a pre-emptive dismissal of any news source outside of his established news silo, which is not based on an evaluation of any specific content rather largely it is a blanket rejection stemming from his pre-existing worldview. As John stated many times, he believes that the opposite, mainstream media is full of lies and does not show things in the proper light. So, for John, the opposite media simply does not provide him with a base reinforcement of his existing values and beliefs, and thus he outright rejects it. His bare minimum is likely significantly more ideological rather than informational. Though it would be folly to say that this is not something that everyone, even the other three on the left, engage in as well to some degree.

4.2 John: A Case Study in Mainstreaming

In stark contrast to Chassa, Cholly, and Magali, the interview with John provided a compelling case study of mainstreaming. John's responses mirrored common narratives found in far-right news sources, such as Rebel News and The Epoch Times, sources that he states multiple times he consumes exclusively, rejecting anything he considers mainstream or on the left. He deliberately chooses to limit his exposure to information that does not align with his worldview. In these limited news sources, he does not seek information, he seeks affirmation. His use of the phrases "scamdemic" and the "alphabet group" show a close alignment with the rhetoric and framing commonly employed by these sources. These phrases explicitly should be considered "television answers" as they are phrases that stem directly from the world of alt-right media, which is a point that should have been made in the video essay. Overall, John clearly

demonstrates a convergence with the homogeneous messaging of his media, which by definition is what Gerbner considered mainstreaming.

4.3 Resonance: Abstract vs Concrete

By Gerbner's definition of Resonance, Chassa, Cholly, and Magali should be highly susceptible to mainstreaming because they receive a "double dose" of the messaging from their media and from their lived realities. For example, Chassa sees constant discussion of transgender issues in her media, and then her children bring home discussion of that topic from their school. The novel assertion that I am making is that resonance is only most applicable to individuals when the messaging does not come against actual lived realities. When the connections to a message are more abstract can mainstreaming occur. For example, if Magali were to read right-leaning news about indigenous groups, that story could resonate with her up until they make assertions that go against her experiences working with those peoples—such as a blanket statement that says the chiefs wanted the children to go into residential schools.

I make the claim that Chassa, Cholly, and Magali are not subjected to mainstreaming because they declare real-world personal connections to their given social issues within their interviews. On the other hand, I make the assertion that John is subjected to mainstreaming because he attempts to make abstract connections to his social issues. John connects himself to his social issues through attacks on his sense of self, on his moral values, and on his belief systems, which is distinctly something that the other three never attempt to do. Chassa, Cholly, and Magali do speak of social issues that are commonly discussed in left-leaning news media, yet for each issue they provide concrete personal connections to those issues. Their lived experiences provide a framework for evaluating and challenging the media narratives they consume, which I argue makes them less susceptible to cultivation.

If John's media presents something as an issue that needs his attention, then John will construct resonance using whatever he can to then justify the attention he has been told the issue now needs. For example, John continuously references his faith and the bible as reasons for being irked by LGBTQ+ peoples. He again uses the bible for justification for his dislike of truth and reconciliation initiatives, which he calls "people pleasing," a term that likely stems from his media. While it is possible (though unlikely) that John has had real encounters with LGBTQ+ and indigenous peoples attacking his faith, he simply does not bring up any concrete evidence this has ever occurred. The assertion that I am making is that John is cultivated by his media because, especially with the social issues that he discusses, these issues are conjured from his media; they do not come from his lived reality. In fact, it is possible that the media itself suggested these abstract connections; when I arrived to interview John, he was listening to Christian radio that had a very stern preacher on talking about the dangers of not attending church. And John even gives an example of when this does not occur to him, citing an issue that is closer to the examples given by the others: with the one instance where John did have a real-world experience—his attendance at the Ottawa trucker convoy rally.

John rejected the mainstream media's portrayal of the convoy because it contradicted his direct observation of the event. This is an even clearer demonstration of how concrete experience can provide a buffer against media's influence, even for someone who is generally predisposed to accept certain narratives. And yet, what was not included in the video for time was him mentioning how long he stayed at the convoy and when he went: he stayed for a very short time and only went at the beginning of the demonstration. Over time, those experiences became more

abstract against the developing narrative of the harm the convoy was doing. John saw, for a moment, at the very beginning, that the convoy was a pleasant experience. He then held that against the assertion of how bad things became over time, which was very much against the actual lived experiences of the people being deafened by honking for days on end. Even this idea of “lived experience” is completely relative and updated reinforcement of this lived experience is needed; else the media’s narrative takes hold again.

4.4 Resonance: A Reinterpretation

This conception of resonance I have made is a departure and reinterpretation of the original theory by Gerbner. I argue, using the evidence of the four subject’s interviews, that media narratives are still most influential when resonance is at play, but that messaging must not come against the actual lived experiences of the consumer of that media to have full effect. This proposed modification to resonance refines Cultivation Theory by suggesting that the nature of the real-world experience—whether it is concrete or abstract, short lived or long term—is a crucial factor in determining the strength of cultivation’s effects. This distinction between concrete and abstract resonance highlights what I believe to be something often overlooked in Cultivation Theory: the kind of real-world experience matters. Gerbner’s original conception of resonance, while acknowledging the importance of real-world experience, did not fully account for the nuances of how that experience might interact with media messages. Just the concept of the “double dose” as Gerbner described it is not sufficient to explain the observed differences. The nature of that double dose—whether it involves direct, personal engagement with the issue or a more abstract, perceived connection—fundamentally alters the dynamic, and thus alters how, or how much, mainstreaming can occur to an individual.

4.5 On Avoiding Determinism

I do not wish to pretend that this idea of abstract resonance is particularly novel in any other context than within the halls of Cultivation Theory. At the end of all of this, it is hard to avoid or ignore the technologically determinist shortcomings of the theorem. The pitfalls of determinism are taught in the first classes of a Communication Studies Undergrad for a reason, and it is no coincidence that a lot of theories from the 1960s are used to explain these pitfalls. All that I believe I have done in this novel assertion of resonance is attempt to apply some non-determinist logic to a determinist theory. To inject some nuance into a theory that states such matters of fact regarding media, using what I believe to be the least determinist aspect of the theory to build from. Acknowledging this does not diminish the interesting aspects of my analysis though, at least, I hope.

If the scope of this project were larger—and the video essay much longer—this “abstract resonance” would be explored and explained using other theories. An area that bears mention is feminist theory. Purposefully antithetical to the “old-dead-white-man-theory” that is Cultivation Theory would be an exploration using Donna Haraway’s Situated Knowledge. In summary, Haraway’s argues against the idea of a universal, objective “view from nowhere” and instead emphasizes that all knowledge is produced from specific, embodied, and partial perspectives (583). She decries what she calls “the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere,” where some disembodied, universal perspective is presented as the ultimate truth (581). Information, knowledge, our views on the world must all be situated from the perspective of the viewer, and that everyone does not see the same way. This is utterly against Gerbner’s suggestions that media has this all-consuming power to make people all the same, that individuality matters not, either

to begin with or because of media. Now, it could be possible to isolate Haraway, to use her only in exploring resonance further, but doing so would be a disservice to the theory. To me, Haraway and other feminist theorists are completely at odds with the line of thinking of scholars such as Gerbner, sometimes explicitly so. Placing them in conversation is challenging because one seeks to in many ways cancel the other one out. To fully use something like Situated Knowledge would require a heavy refinement of the theory for exploration, to give it the respect that this project does not have the scope to. And of course, intersecting Cultivation Theory with other theoretical frameworks, such as Uses and Gratifications Theory, Framing Theory, and Persona Theory, as was mentioned in the video, could offer a more holistic understanding of the complex interplay between media, individuals, and society than just using cultivation alone—possibly without being so at odds to each other as Haraway and Gerbner would be.

4.6 Reflection on the Form

The final form of this project is considerably different to what I originally envisioned when I started. I envisioned a long-form documentary film that asked big questions like what the purpose of news was and that tried to explore the phenomenon I indicated in this paper's introduction more. I did not manage to explore what causes people to react to things so strongly, because I did not manage to document that phenomenon. When considering a target audience, the video essay landed in somewhat of a middle ground for me, between academic and general audience. I wanted a pedagogical object, yes, but one that could be used by as many people as possible. If I were to show this video to a communications scholar, I feel they would pick apart the theoretical application, some of the determinist viewpoints, and the overall shortness of information and method description in areas. Yet if I were to show this video to my brother, a political science major, I feel he would instead nitpick the presentation of the content itself. And then showing this to a non-academic and/or a random person? I fear that the video would not be fully digestible, the theory too complicated and/or not synthesized simply enough, and that they would not be able to take away as much as I desired. All of this to say, I am in no way unhappy with the video, yet as is always the case with creative works, another iteration would or will be even better. This process allowed me an incredible chance to explore my own approach to media creation and theoretical synthesis, in a form that tested my production skills and understanding and application of theoretical frameworks extensively.

Conclusion

This research-creation project, culminating in the video essay "Mainstreaming," has delved into the relationship between news consumption and individual worldviews, employing George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory as a foundational lens. While cultivation provided a useful framework for exploring the effects of news media, my study complicates traditional understandings of the theory. My use of interview, an experiment, and the analysis of the content of these things, has resulted in an alternative interpretation of cultivation's resonance. The experiment, while not producing significant cultivation effects in the short term, served to reveal the subjects' deeply ingrained news consumption habits and their resistance to alternative media. It showed a reinforcement and justification of existing habits and highlighted the active role those individuals play in curating their news media to fit their needs, based on pre-existing values and beliefs. The contrast between the three on the left, Chassa, Cholly, and Magali, and the one on the right, John, demonstrated the stark difference between those who more actively challenge what is being said in the media they typically consume and those who take everything without critical conjecture. This is the difference between being mainstreamed and not being mainstreamed—though Chassa, Cholly, and Magali not being mainstreamed is not and likely cannot be completely proven, at least not without a much, much longer study.

I see my reinterpretation of cultivation's resonance to be more of an attempt at updating and trying to apply cultivation in a less deterministic method, to give more agency to the subjects and less omniscient power to the media they consume. Though at the same time, I must admit there are still some determinist takes in my analysis of the subjects, especially with John; I justify this as being due to the limited material from his interview. Given a longer discussion, and if he had done the experiment, more nuance with John could likely have been applied, and further examples of concrete versus abstract resonance could have been presented. I hope that I have at least shown though that individuals do not just passively accept media narratives wholesale and instead evaluate media messages based on a number of personal factors that either limit or amplify the potential effects of that media.

This project opens several avenues for future research for me. The most straightforward avenue would be to perform cultivation analysis using more of Gerbner's original methods. Studies with a much larger sample size, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods; studies performed over a much longer period of time, tracking individuals' news consumption habits and worldviews; and all of this with studies featuring a greater diversity of subjects, in age, political leanings, gender, and race could help further investigate concrete and abstract resonance and its impact on cultivation effects as I have identified in this project. As well, exploring the differences between different types of media should be explored, especially social media, as news can take so many forms there. The project's original hypothesis—that exposure to alternative news media would not change beliefs but would alter emotional responses—was not fully supported, and the revised focus on resonance and the distinction between concrete and abstract experiences proved to be a more fruitful avenue of inquiry. But a further exploration into the original hypothesis with this new concept of resonance could be an avenue of further exploration.

Something that my alternative interpretation to resonance may also shed light on is the enduring appeal of certain types of media narratives. Gerbner focused on the Mean World because he saw a pervasiveness of violence in the television of his day. Violence, giving feelings of anxiety and fear still dominates much of media today, and within news media I would argue

that these feelings present even stronger than in television drama. The Mean World Syndrome, as a manifestation of cultivation's effects, is not simply about believing the world is more dangerous: it is about being made to feel more vulnerable and anxious. To reiterate, John mentioning "people pleasing" and the "alphabet group," his general perception of the erosion of his traditional values, these issues to him are (likely) not rooted in direct, negative experiences he has had. Rather, they are cultivated by his media to frame these issues as existential threats. There is a fabricated sense of unease, reinforcing John's worldview to demand constant attention towards intangible perceived threats. Yet why this is always negative, pessimistic, towards destruction, in making such a mean world is something that should be explored further.

My ultimate goal for this project was and still is towards reflection. Personal reflection, on a concept that I have carried with me for nearly twenty years. My understanding of the Mean World Syndrome and Cultivation Theory has grown immensely, and I still see its impact in my everyday, though with more nuance. Reflection from my participants, in the role that news plays in their lives. I think that with Chassa especially there was a noticeable amount of reflection and possible further change to her news consumption habits. Even with John, I hoped that there was some level of introspection from talking with me, even if it was incredibly minute. And with the viewers of the video essay or readers of this thesis paper, I hope this has spurred some self reflection on the role of news. I hope viewers can recognize that the news is not a transparent window on the world, rather it is often an opaque, constructed view tinted by the biases and agendas of those who set it in place. Understand that we, as consumers of all kinds of media, not just news, are not passive recipients. We have agency. We can challenge narratives and choose to seek out diverse perspectives. Yet when consuming our typical sources, we can actively ground ourselves through our own lived realities, and use concrete, tangible experiences to counter the effects of cultivation, mainstreaming, the Mean World Syndrome, and anything else media can throw at us.

I wrote before that I approached a level of apathy towards the news. This should never happen. Because through apathy leads ignorance. As much as I hate to say it, the news is still a dominant means of being connected with the goings on in the world. Even at the risk of being cultivated, if we disconnect from the goings on in the world then we risk losing our ability to hold things accountable. Despite what Gerbner may have stated about the unavoidable effects of mainstreaming, we all have agency. Agency to choose what we consume and agency to act on the information that consumption provides us. We must just make sure that we are using the news to shape our world, rather than letting the news shape our world for us.

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Appendix



The Survey Flier



A screenshot of the short video advertisement.

SURVEY QUESTIONS NEWS CONSUMPTION SECTION:

1. How much news do you feel you consume on a daily basis? (required)
 - a. A lot
 - b. A little
 - c. Very little
 - d. None
2. To you, being informed and up to date on LOCAL EVENTS is: (required)
 - a. Very Important
 - b. Important
3. To you, being informed and up to date on WORLD EVENTS is: (required)
 - a. Very Important
 - b. Important
4. In general, news makes me feel (check all that apply):
 - a. Angry
 - b. Emotional
 - c. Sad
 - d. Happy
 - e. Inspired
 - f. Apathetic
 - g. None of the above
5. How would you describe the overall political leanings of the news media you typically consume?
 - a. Left
 - b. Left leaning
 - c. Center
 - d. Right
 - e. Right leaning
 - f. I consume all kinds of news media

6. The news sources you seek out tend to be: (required)
 - a. Canadian
 - b. American
 - c. A mix of Canadian and American
 - d. Global
 - e. It depends
7. You primarily get your news from (check ALL that apply): (required)
 - a. Online
 - b. Radio/Podcasts
 - c. Print Media (i.e., newspapers, magazines)
 - d. Television
 - e. Other
8. If you checked "online" in the previous question, what online sources do you typically use? (Check ALL that apply) (required)
 - a. Social Media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, etc.)
 - b. News Feeds (i.e., Apple News, Google News, etc.)
 - c. News Sites (i.e., cbc.ca, cnn.com, yahoo.com, etc.)
 - d. Other
9. Socially, news is a topic of conversation:(required)
 - a. Always/often
 - b. Sometimes
 - c. Rarely
 - d. Never
10. Would you be interested in participating in a research documentary project continuing this line of questioning, involving filmed interviews and an experiment involving news consumption? (required)
 - a. Yes
 - b. Maybe
 - c. No
 - d. Do you understand that your answers in section 2 may be used as part of the research, including illustratively in the documentary? (required)
 - d. I understand