

**Understanding Mass Communication Through the Theories of Cultivation,
Agenda-Setting, and Uses & Gratifications**

Research Paper

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COST 200: Theory of Communication

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May 5th, 2025

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Mass Communication is defined as a form of communication which involves communicating with the mass audience through channels that are referred to as mass media (Puri, 2006). This Research Paper will explore prominent communication theories that help deepen our understanding of how mass media influences both individuals and society. Moreover, I will be expanding on the theories of Cultivation Theory, Uses and Gratifications, and Agenda-Setting; and how they provide insight into the ways media shape audience responses and create different perceptions of reality.

Context

The three theories of Cultivation Theory, Uses and Gratifications, and Agenda-Setting fall under the context of Mass Communication; a context that explores how messages are produced, transmitted, and received by large, diverse audiences through media platforms. Berger (1995) explains that Mass Communication involves the use of print or electronic media, such as newspapers, magazines, film, radio, or television, to communicate to large numbers of people who are located in various places, mostly spread over the country or world. In this way, Mass Communication can adopt different types; images, spoken language, printed language, sound effects, music and color, among others to communicate messages and obtain particular effects. Cultivation Theory explores how media exposure to television influences viewers' perception of reality. Uses and Gratifications Theory focuses on the decisions the audience takes in order to satisfy their needs through the media. Agenda-Setting Theory highlights the power of media in shaping public discourse.

Traditions

Communication theory is a coherent field when we understand communication as a practical discipline. Within this field, there are seven different traditions of communication theory, and each of them offers different approaches, alternative vocabularies and distinctive language. The three theories analyzed within this essay, Cultivation Theory, Uses and Gratifications, and Agenda-Setting, are part of two different traditions: the socio-psychological tradition and the socio-cultural tradition.

On the one hand, the socio-psychological tradition views communication as interpersonal interaction and influence. Scholars in this tradition believe that communication truths can be discovered through careful, systematic observation. They rely on cause-and-effect relationships, which leads to designing a series of surveys or controlled experiments to find measurable results. On the other hand, the socio-cultural tradition views communication as the creation and enactment of social reality. It claims that culture is produced and reproduced as people communicate. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity supports this idea, stating that the structure of a language shapes what people think and do; highlighting the social construction of reality. Cultivation Theory, Uses and Gratifications, and Agenda-Setting are all theories heavily influenced by the socio-psychological tradition, which makes them objective approaches. However, Cultivation Theory is also part of the socio-cultural tradition, which adds a more interpretative component to the theory.

Literature Review

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory, developed by George Gerbner in the 1960's, is a theory that seeks to explain the impact that TV has on TV viewers. The Theory suggests that television viewing

encourages a particular view of the world that may depict it as a much more aggressive and violent reality (Griffin, Ledbetter, & Sparks, 2019). The theory highlights that heavy viewers are most likely to be affected, due to the elevated amount of TV consumed, and consequently they would be encouraged to have a particular view of the world that aligns closely with the reality depicted on TV.

According to Sellnow & Seeger (2013), this theory highlights three prongs, which each include a different approach to the TV world. The first prong is the institutional analysis; defined as scholarship, that penetrates behind the scenes of media organizations in an effort to understand what policies or practices might be lurking there. The second prong is message system analysis; scholarship that involves careful, systematic study of TV content, usually employing content analysis as a research method. This research was initially Developed to measure violence but used for other content as well. The third prong is cultivation analysis, research designed to support the notion that those who spend more time watching TV are more likely to see the real world through a TV lens.

This theory relies on the distinction between light viewers and heavy viewers. Moreover, light viewers spend 0 to 2 hours watching TV, whereas heavy viewers spend more than 4 hours doing so. These differences in the TV consumption may affect how they perceive social reality; heavy viewers are more likely to see the social worlds as depicted on TV. This concept is called “Mean World Syndrome” and is defined as a particular form of cognitive bias that developed as a consequence of a TV-cultivated view of the world based on heavy TV viewing.

Cultivation theory meets all the criteria for objective theories; explanation of the data, prediction of future events, relative simplicity, testable hypotheses, practical utility and quantitative research. However, the theory has faced criticism when it comes to different

components. For example, scholars have questioned Gerbner's definition of violence, the decision to lump together all types of dramatic programs, assumptions that there is always a consistent television answer and his simple hours-per-day standard of categorizing viewers as light or heavy (Griffin, Ledbetter, & Sparks, 2019). These considerations suggest that, even though the theory meets all the criteria for scientific theories, it still has some limitations.

Uses and Gratifications

Uses and gratifications theory is a theory proposed by Elihu Katz, in which he switches the focus made in media; instead of asking the typical "What do media do to people?", it asks "What do people do with media?", creating an audience-centred approach that seeks to understand why and how individuals actively seek out media to gratify their original needs (Liu, 2025). This theory especially highlights how users seek media and satisfy these needs depending on the type, content, and method of use (Mehrad & Tajer, 2016). In this way, this theory depicts media consumption as a deliberate choice designed to satisfy particular needs.

Uses and Gratifications is built from a base of five assumptions; assumption 1: People Use Media for Their Own Particular Purposes; assumption 2: People Seek to Gratify Needs; assumption 3: Media Compete for Your Attention and Time; assumption 4: Media Affect Different People Differently and assumption 5: People Can Accurately Report Their Media Use and Motivation.

The first assumption deals with the idea of audiences being active in the decision of which media they want to use and what effects they want the media to have on them. Secondly, Uses & Grats assumes that people gratify their different needs through media use, carefully deciding which media to consume. The third assumption deals with the media competing for the attention and time of people. Fourthly, this theory shows that people are affected by the media in

different ways; for example, one type of content media that may be enjoyable for someone, may be emotionally upsetting for someone else. Finally, the last assumption is that people are able to report both their media use and their motivation. However, this assumption remains to be debated, considering that it is very hard to rely on the measurement people do about their media consumption.

Extensive research has been made to construct typologies to explain the potential reasons why people may consciously expose themselves to the media. A typology is defined as a classification scheme that attempts to sort a large number of specific instances into a more manageable set of categories (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). A famous typology was proposed by Alan Rubin in 1981, where eight different motivations to why people watch television. The categories are the following:

1. Passing time
2. Companionship
3. Escape
4. Enjoyment
5. Social interaction
6. Relaxation
7. Information
8. Excitement

This theory does not meet all the criteria for objective theories. Moreover, the only two criteria that it does have are relative simplicity and quantitative research, and it lacks explanation of the data, prediction of future events, testable hypotheses and practical utility. One of the most

important criticisms that this theory faces is the descriptive typology of media uses and gratifications, which lacks prediction or explanation of information.

Agenda-Setting

Agenda-Setting is a theory proposed by Maxwell McCombs & Donald Shaw that seeks to understand how and why the media assign importance to and actually structure the issues presented to the public. (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). The theory operates on three levels: first, the media tells us what to think about; second, how to think about it, with framing of the stories; and third, which issues are linked together. Considering these levels, the agenda shapes public discourse and can significantly influence public opinion.

When analyzing Agenda-Setting, there are some important concepts to highlight. To begin with, this theory proposes that a personal agenda is the small set of issues that are most important to someone at one specific moment. Another concept is the Public Agenda which are the most important public issues as measured by public opinion surveys. Moreover, this concept escalates to another one; media agenda, which stands for the list of issues emphasized by the news media at a given time. Finally, these concepts consolidate Agenda-Setting, which affirms that over time, the media agenda shapes the public agenda; which claims that there is a relationship between what the news reports and how the public thinks about the world.

Expanding on the three levels of Agenda Setting, there are different considerations and aspects to take into account. To begin with, the first level, as mentioned before

The second level claims that even though the media may not be as successful in telling the public what to think, they are successful in telling what to think about. This claim is explained through the concept of framing; which is making certain attributes more salient than others. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) as a way of examining how the portrayal that the news

presents affects the public's perception of events. This phenomenon has an important impact on the audience, both cognitive and behavioral.

The third level deals with how the media portrays issues that are linked together. In this way, it generates an interconnected web in which some connections may be stronger than others. For the viewer, repeatedly viewing topics linked together may create a perception that they are intertwined (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013).

Agenda-Setting meets all the criteria for objective theories except for two: explanation of the data and prediction of future events. The biggest challenge this theory has faced is that it was developed before the digital era when the news environment was much different. This challenges the possibility of implementing the theory nowadays, considering that the digital era has completely changed the agenda.

Connections

Each of the three theories deals with how the media shape our perception of reality through different approaches. Cultivation Theory suggests that heavy exposure to television content cultivates a distorted or exaggerated view of the world (e.g., believing the world is more dangerous than it is). Agenda-Setting shows how media highlight certain topics, making them appear more important in public consciousness. Uses and Gratifications adds the layer of individual motivation, showing how people may seek out media that fulfills emotional, social, or cognitive needs. These three theories together generate a cycle; media select what to show (Agenda-Setting), viewers interpret it through repeated exposure and may perceive the world differently than it is (Cultivation), and they choose what to watch or engage with based on their needs (Uses and Gratifications), which may reinforce or challenge those same perceptions.

Another interesting connection that can be drawn is how all three theories assume certain limitations in the audience. Cultivation Theory implies that viewers are cognitively immature; they don't differentiate between fantasy and reality. Furthermore, Agenda-Setting assumes that humans have a limited ability to generate original thought. Finally, the assumption three from Uses & Grats states that the media compete for your attention and time. In this way, the three theories are portraying the audience as not fully capable of dominating their consumptions and thought processing.

Conclusion

The theories of Cultivation Theory, Uses and Gratifications, and Agenda-Setting provide a very interesting insight into Mass Communication. Each of these theories provide different approaches to how Mass Communication influences human behavior and perceptions.

Cultivation Theory navigates the idea that heavy television viewing encourages a particular view of the world that portrays it as much more aggressive than the reality. Moreover, Uses & Grats helps understanding that individuals actively seek out media to gratify their different needs. Finally, Agenda-Setting, explores how and why the media assign importance to and actually structure the issues presented to the public. The connection and analysis of these three theories help create a cycle in which media content shapes public perception, the content consumed influences their worldview, and they actively engage with media based on their needs. Moreover, these three theories imply that at some point, the audience is not fully capable of deciding their consumptions due to different factors, which limitates their power. Studying these three theories profoundly helps understand the impact that media has on people, and how we are constantly exposed to it.

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