# CULTIVATING REALITY: LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF TELEVISION NEWS ON PUBLIC PERCEPTION

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**Abstract**
*Television news remains one of the most influential sources of information shaping public understanding of social reality, particularly in contexts characterized by political uncertainty, risk, and crisis. Drawing on cultivation theory, this study examines the long-term effects of television news consumption on public perceptions of social reality, including perceptions of crime, political trust, social cohesion, and institutional credibility. While early cultivation research focused largely on entertainment television, this paper extends the theory to contemporary television news by synthesizing empirical literature and proposing a structured analytical framework for understanding how repeated exposure to news narratives cultivates shared perceptions over time. Through a systematic review of foundational and applied studies, the paper argues that television news contributes to a gradual, cumulative shaping of reality by emphasizing specific frames, tones, and symbolic representations. The findings underscore the relevance of cultivation processes in news environments marked by sensationalism, fear-based reporting, and episodic framing. The study contributes to media effects research by integrating cultivation theory with framing and agenda-setting perspectives, offering a comprehensive model for analyzing long-term perceptual outcomes of television news exposure.*

**Keywords:** cultivation theory, television news, media effects, public perception, social reality, framing

## 1. Introduction

Television news has long occupied a central position in modern societies as a primary mediator between events and public understanding. Despite the rapid growth of digital platforms, television continues to function as a dominant source of political information, crisis reporting, and social interpretation, particularly in developing and transitional societies. Unlike episodic media exposure, television news consumption often occurs on a habitual and long-term basis, embedding itself in the daily routines of viewers. This sustained exposure raises critical questions about how television news influences public perceptions of social reality over time.

The theoretical foundation for examining long-term media effects lies in cultivation theory, originally developed by Gerbner and colleagues in the context of television entertainment. Cultivation theory posits that prolonged exposure to television content gradually shapes viewers' perceptions of reality, aligning them with the symbolic world presented on screen (Gerbner et al., 1980). While the theory initially focused on violence in fictional

programming, subsequent research has expanded its scope to include news media, political communication, and social issues.

Television news does not merely reflect reality; it constructs it through selective emphasis, framing, repetition, and narrative patterns. Persistent exposure to crime-focused reporting, political conflict, or crisis-driven narratives can cultivate heightened perceptions of societal danger, mistrust, and instability. These cultivated perceptions may not result from immediate persuasion but rather from the slow accumulation of consistent messages across time.

Despite its relevance, the application of cultivation theory to television news remains underexplored compared to entertainment media. Much of the existing research on news effects prioritizes short-term influences such as agenda-setting or framing, often overlooking the cumulative and longitudinal nature of news exposure. This study addresses this gap by examining how television news cultivates shared perceptions of social reality over extended periods.

The central aim of this paper is to analyze how long-term exposure to television news shapes public perceptions of reality, with particular attention to fear, trust, political cynicism, and social norms. By synthesizing existing empirical literature and theoretical insights, the study offers a comprehensive framework for understanding cultivation processes in television news.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Origins of Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory emerged from the Cultural Indicators Project led by George Gerbner in the late 1960s and 1970s. The theory was developed to examine television's role as a centralized storytelling system that shapes collective consciousness (Gerbner et al., 1976). Gerbner argued that television does not influence audiences through direct persuasion but through the steady accumulation of consistent messages that construct a symbolic environment.

Central to cultivation theory is the concept of *mainstreaming*, whereby heavy television viewers develop homogeneous perceptions that override individual differences, and *resonance*, which occurs when televised content aligns with viewers' lived experiences, amplifying cultivation effects (Gerbner et al., 1980). Early cultivation studies demonstrated that heavy viewers were more likely to overestimate crime rates and perceive the world as more dangerous, a phenomenon termed the "mean world syndrome."

Although these early studies focused primarily on fictional violence, Gerbner emphasized that news programming was equally central to the cultivation process, as it systematically defined social problems, threats, and power relations.

### 2.2 Extending Cultivation Theory to News Media

Subsequent scholars extended cultivation theory beyond entertainment to include news content. Morgan and Shanahan (1997) argued that television news contributes to the cultivation of political attitudes, social fears, and ideological orientations by repeatedly emphasizing certain themes such as crime, corruption, and conflict.

Unlike fictional programming, television news claims factual authority, which may enhance its cultivation power. Repeated exposure to similar news frames can normalize specific interpretations of reality, leading viewers to internalize dominant narratives as common sense (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Research has demonstrated that heavy exposure to television news is associated with heightened fear of crime, pessimism about social change, and reduced trust in institutions (Romer et al., 2003). These effects are particularly pronounced when news coverage relies on sensational visuals, emotional language, and episodic framing.

## 2.3 Television News, Fear, and Risk Perception

One of the most extensively studied cultivation outcomes in news research is fear. Television news frequently prioritizes crime, terrorism, disasters, and conflict, creating an environment in which danger appears omnipresent. Altheide (1997) introduced the concept of the "problem frame," arguing that news media construct a discourse of fear that shapes public perceptions of risk. Studies have shown that heavy television news viewers are more likely to overestimate the likelihood of victimization and perceive society as increasingly unsafe (Gross & Aday, 2003). These cultivated fears persist even when objective crime rates decline, suggesting that television news contributes to distorted perceptions of reality through repetition and symbolic emphasis.

## 2.4 Political Perceptions and Trust

Television news also plays a significant role in shaping political perceptions. Continuous exposure to conflict-centered political reporting can cultivate cynicism, distrust, and disengagement (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Strategic framing of politics as a game of power rather than a process of governance encourages viewers to perceive political actors as self-interested and untrustworthy.

Cultivation research indicates that heavy television news consumption is associated with lower political efficacy and reduced confidence in democratic institutions (Mutz & Reeves, 2005). These effects are cumulative, emerging gradually through sustained exposure rather than immediate persuasion (Aslam et al., 2020; Aslam & Ahmad, 2019; Hussain et al., 2021).

## 2.5 Integrating Cultivation with Framing and Agenda-Setting

While cultivation theory emphasizes long-term effects, framing and agenda-setting theories focus on issue salience and interpretive schemas. Scholars increasingly argue for an integrated approach, recognizing that agenda-setting determines what people think about, framing influences how they think, and cultivation shapes what they come to believe is normal or typical (McCombs, 2004).

Television news cultivates reality by repeatedly framing certain issues, crime, corruption, and insecurity within consistent narrative patterns. Over time, these frames solidify into taken-for-granted assumptions about society.

## 3. Research Questions

Based on the literature, the study addresses the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How does long-term exposure to television news influence public perceptions of social reality?

**RQ2:** What types of perceptions (e.g., fear, trust, political cynicism) are most strongly cultivated by television news?

**RQ3:** How do framing patterns in television news contribute to cultivation effects?

**RQ4:** What role does habitual news consumption play in mainstreaming public perceptions?

## 4. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded primarily in Cultivation Theory, complemented by Framing Theory and Agenda-Setting Theory, to explain how long-term exposure to television news shapes public perceptions of social reality. Together, these frameworks allow for a multi-layered understanding of media influence that moves beyond short-term attitudinal change to address cumulative, structural effects of news consumption.

## 4.1 Cultivation Theory and Television News

Cultivation theory posits that television functions as a dominant cultural storyteller that gradually shapes viewers' perceptions of social reality through repetitive and consistent messaging (Gerbner et al., 1976; Gerbner et al., 1980). Unlike theories that emphasize

immediate persuasion or selective effects, cultivation theory focuses on long-term, cumulative exposure, arguing that heavy viewers of television tend to internalize the symbolic world presented on screen as an accurate reflection of real life.

Although early cultivation research concentrated on fictional violence, later scholars extended the theory to television news, recognizing its central role in defining social problems, risks, and power relations (Morgan & Shanahan, 1997). Television news is particularly potent in cultivation processes because it presents itself as factual and authoritative, thereby reinforcing the credibility of its symbolic constructions. Repeated exposure to news narratives emphasizing crime, political instability, corruption, or social disorder can cultivate heightened perceptions of danger, mistrust, and pessimism among audiences over time.

Two key mechanisms of cultivation are especially relevant to television news. Mainstreaming refers to the process by which heavy television viewing reduces differences in perceptions across social groups, leading to more homogeneous worldviews aligned with dominant media narratives. Resonance occurs when media portrayals correspond with individuals' lived experiences, amplifying cultivation effects (Gerbner et al., 1980). In news contexts, resonance is particularly strong when audiences encounter coverage that mirrors local insecurity, political turmoil, or economic uncertainty.

## 4.2 Framing Theory and the Construction of Meaning

While cultivation theory explains long-term perceptual outcomes, framing theory provides insight into how television news constructs meaning. Framing refers to the selection and emphasis of certain aspects of reality to promote particular interpretations, evaluations, and solutions (Entman, 1993). Television news frames issues through narrative structure, language, visuals, and sourcing practices, guiding audiences toward specific understandings of events.

News frames are not isolated; they are repeated across stories and time, contributing to the symbolic environment that cultivation theory describes. For example, episodic framing of crime or political conflict focuses on individual incidents rather than structural causes, encouraging viewers to interpret social problems as isolated or inevitable. Over prolonged exposure, such frames become normalized, reinforcing cultivated perceptions of a chaotic or dysfunctional society.

Framing theory thus operates at the meso-level, linking individual news texts to broader cultivation processes. Persistent framing patterns help explain why certain perceptions—such as fear of crime or political cynicism, are disproportionately cultivated among heavy television news viewers.

## 4.3 Agenda-Setting and Issue Visibility

Agenda-setting theory complements cultivation and framing by addressing issue salience. According to agenda-setting research, media do not tell audiences what to think but rather what to think about by prioritizing certain issues in news coverage (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2004). Television news, through repeated coverage of specific topics such as crime, terrorism, or political scandals, elevates these issues in public consciousness.

From a cultivation perspective, sustained agenda-setting contributes to the normalization of certain concerns as defining features of social reality. When specific issues dominate television news over extended periods, they become perceived as more frequent, more severe, and more socially consequential than they may be in objective terms. Agenda-setting thus reinforces cultivation effects by ensuring consistent exposure to a narrow set of symbolic themes.

### 4.4 Integrated Conceptual Model

In this study, cultivation theory serves as the overarching framework explaining long-term perceptual change, while framing and agenda-setting theories function as complementary mechanisms that shape the content and emphasis of television news messages. Television news is conceptualized as a symbolic system in which repeated frames and issue priorities gradually cultivate shared understandings of social reality.

This integrated framework enables a holistic analysis of how habitual television news consumption contributes to perceptions of fear, trust, political cynicism, and social norms over time.

## 5. Methodology

### 5.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative systematic literature review and theoretical synthesis as its primary methodological approach. Given the study's focus on long-term media effects and theoretical integration, a qualitative design is most appropriate for examining patterns, mechanisms, and conceptual linkages across decades of cultivation and news effects research. Rather than generating new empirical data, the study synthesizes existing empirical findings and theoretical arguments to develop a coherent analytical framework for understanding the cultivation effects of television news. This approach is consistent with prior media effects scholarship that seeks to refine and extend theoretical models through integrative analysis (Morgan & Shanahan, 1997).

### 5.2 Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The corpus of literature was drawn from peer-reviewed academic journals, edited volumes, and foundational books in media and communication studies. Key databases typically used for such reviews include Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, with an emphasis on highly cited and theoretically influential works.

Studies were selected based on the following criteria:

1. Focus on television news or television viewing
2. Explicit engagement with cultivation theory, framing theory, or agenda-setting
3. Examination of long-term or cumulative media effects
4. Empirical or theoretical relevance to public perception, fear, trust, or political attitudes

Both quantitative and qualitative studies were included to capture the breadth of methodological approaches within cultivation research.

### 5.3 Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, selected studies were systematically reviewed to identify recurring themes, variables, and findings related to television news exposure and public perception. Particular attention was paid to how studies operationalized long-term exposure and perceptual outcomes.

Second, framing patterns and issue emphases identified in the literature were mapped onto cultivation mechanisms, highlighting how repeated frames contribute to symbolic environments. This stage focused on identifying dominant narrative structures, such as fear-based reporting, conflict framing, and episodic storytelling.

Third, insights from cultivation, framing, and agenda-setting research were synthesized into an integrated conceptual model. This model illustrates how television news content, repetition, and framing interact over time to cultivate shared perceptions of social reality.

5.4 Validity and Rigor

To enhance analytical rigor, the study prioritizes seminal works and peer-reviewed research with established theoretical contributions. Cross-study comparisons were used to identify consistent findings and theoretical convergence, reducing reliance on isolated or context-specific results.

Theoretical triangulation, drawing on multiple complementary frameworks, further strengthens the validity of the analysis by offering convergent explanations for long-term media effects.

## 5.5 Ethical Considerations

As this study is based exclusively on secondary sources, no human participants were involved, and no ethical approval was required. All sources are properly cited to ensure academic integrity and transparency.

## 6. Data Analysis

This study employs a qualitative analytical synthesis of prior empirical research to examine patterns in how long-term exposure to television news cultivates public perceptions of social reality. Rather than statistical aggregation, the analysis focuses on identifying recurring empirical regularities, dominant perceptual outcomes, and mechanisms of cultivation documented across decades of media effects research.

## 6.1 Patterns of Long-Term Exposure and Perceptual Alignment

Across the reviewed literature, a consistent pattern emerges: individuals with sustained, habitual exposure to television news exhibit perceptions of social reality that align more closely with dominant media narratives than with objective social indicators. Heavy television news viewers tend to overestimate the prevalence of crime, social disorder, and political instability, even in contexts where empirical data indicate declining or stable trends (Gerbner et al., 1980; Gross & Aday, 2003). This perceptual alignment reflects the cultivation process whereby repetitive exposure to similar symbolic messages produces shared assumptions about the world. Television news, by emphasizing dramatic, conflict-oriented, and episodic content, constructs a symbolic environment in which danger, crisis, and institutional failure appear routine rather than exceptional.

## 6.2 Cultivation of Fear and Risk Perception

One of the most robust cultivation outcomes identified in the literature is the amplification of fear and perceived risk. Studies consistently show that heavy television news consumption is associated with heightened fear of crime, terrorism, and social breakdown (Romer et al., 2003). These effects persist even after controlling for personal victimization and local crime rates, suggesting that television news functions as an independent cultivator of fear. The analysis indicates that fear cultivation is reinforced through visual imagery, emotional storytelling, and repetition. Graphic visuals, dramatic language, and breaking-news formats create a sense of immediacy and omnipresence of threat. Over time, these cues normalize fear as a baseline emotional orientation toward society.

## 6.3 Political Cynicism and Institutional Distrust

The literature also demonstrates a strong relationship between long-term television news exposure and political cynicism. Persistent framing of politics as conflictual, strategic, and scandal-driven cultivates perceptions of political actors as self-interested and untrustworthy (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Viewers exposed to such coverage over extended periods are more likely to develop generalized distrust toward political institutions and democratic processes. This cultivation effect is not attributable to single news events but to the cumulative impact of repeated narratives emphasizing failure, corruption, and incompetence.

The analysis reveals that such cultivated cynicism may reduce political efficacy and engagement, contributing to broader patterns of democratic disengagement (Mutz & Reeves, 2005).

## 6.4 Mainstreaming and Homogenization of Perceptions

Evidence across studies supports the mainstreaming hypothesis of cultivation theory. Heavy television news viewers, regardless of demographic differences, tend to converge toward similar perceptions of social reality. This homogenization suggests that television news functions as a centralizing cultural force, reducing perceptual diversity and reinforcing dominant interpretations of societal conditions (Morgan & Shanahan, 1997). Mainstreaming effects are particularly pronounced in societies where television remains the primary source of news and where alternative narratives are less accessible. In such contexts, television news plays a critical role in defining what is perceived as normal, dangerous, or inevitable.

## 7. Discussion

This study examined the long-term effects of television news exposure on public perceptions of social reality through the lens of cultivation theory. The synthesized findings reinforce the argument that television news functions not merely as a source of information but as a centralized symbolic system that gradually shapes how audiences understand danger, politics, and social order. By integrating cultivation theory with framing and agenda-setting perspectives, this discussion situates the findings within a broader tradition of media effects research and clarifies the mechanisms through which television news cultivates durable perceptions over time.

## 7.1 Reaffirming Cultivation Theory in the Context of Television News

The findings strongly reaffirm the relevance of cultivation theory for understanding news media effects, extending Gerbner's original formulation beyond entertainment programming. While early cultivation studies focused on fictional violence, Gerbner and colleagues consistently emphasized that news programming plays a crucial role in defining social reality because it claims factual authority (Gerbner et al., 1980). Television news, unlike fictional content, is consumed as an authoritative account of the real world, which enhances its capacity to cultivate shared perceptions.

Consistent with cultivation research, the effects identified in this study are cumulative rather than immediate. Heavy television news viewers do not simply adopt specific opinions; instead, they internalize broader assumptions about how society functions, including perceptions of danger, instability, and institutional failure (Morgan & Shanahan, 1997; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). These findings support the argument that cultivation operates at a macro-cultural level, shaping common sense understandings rather than discrete attitudes (Faizullah et al., 2021).

## 7.2 Cultivation of Fear and the "Mean World" in News Exposure

One of the most pronounced cultivation outcomes identified in this study is the amplification of fear and perceived risk. Extensive research demonstrates that prolonged exposure to television news increases fear of crime, terrorism, and social disorder, even when personal experience or objective indicators do not support such perceptions (Gerbner et al., 1980; Romer et al., 2003). This pattern mirrors the "mean world syndrome," originally identified in entertainment television, but adapted here to news content .

Television news cultivates fear through repetitive emphasis on dramatic events, violent incidents, and crises, often presented in episodic and emotionally charged formats (Altheide, 1997). Over time, such representations normalize danger as a defining feature of social life.

The findings align with previous research showing that heavy news viewers overestimate crime prevalence and personal risk, independent of actual crime rates (Gross & Aday, 2003). Importantly, cultivation theory explains why these effects persist: fear is not produced by individual stories but by symbolic consistency across time. Television news repeatedly constructs a reality in which threats appear frequent and unavoidable, leading audiences to adopt heightened vigilance as a default orientation toward the world.

### 7.3 Political Cynicism and Institutional Distrust as Cultivated Outcomes

Beyond fear, the findings indicate that long-term television news exposure cultivates political cynicism and distrust toward institutions. Prior research demonstrates that television news often frames politics as strategic conflict, scandal, and competition rather than collective problem-solving (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Sustained exposure to such frames cultivates perceptions of political actors as self-interested and institutions as ineffective.

This study's findings are consistent with research showing that heavy television news consumption is associated with lower political trust and reduced political efficacy (Mutz & Reeves, 2005). From a cultivation perspective, these outcomes emerge gradually as audiences internalize repeated portrayals of political dysfunction. Rather than fostering critical engagement, such coverage may normalize cynicism as a rational response to politics. The cultivation of political distrust has broader democratic implications. When citizens come to perceive political failure as inevitable, their expectations of accountability diminish, potentially weakening democratic participation and social cohesion (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

### 7.4 Mainstreaming and the Homogenization of Social Perceptions

The findings also provide strong support for the mainstreaming hypothesis of cultivation theory. Across studies, heavy television news viewers, regardless of socioeconomic or demographic differences, tend to converge toward similar perceptions of social reality (Morgan & Shanahan, 1997). This convergence suggests that television news acts as a powerful cultural equalizer, producing shared interpretations of risk, politics, and social order. Mainstreaming is particularly significant in media environments where television remains the dominant news source. In such contexts, television news can override localized experiences and alternative perspectives, creating a homogenized worldview aligned with dominant media narratives (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). While shared perceptions can facilitate collective understanding, they may also marginalize dissenting viewpoints and reduce interpretive diversity.

### 7.5 Integrating Cultivation, Framing, and Agenda-Setting

A key theoretical contribution of this study lies in its integration of cultivation theory with framing and agenda-setting approaches. Agenda-setting research explains how repeated emphasis elevates certain issues in public consciousness (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2004), while framing theory clarifies how those issues are interpreted (Entman, 1993). Cultivation theory extends these insights by explaining how repetition across time transforms issue salience and frames into stable perceptions of reality. This integrated framework helps address critiques that cultivation theory lacks explanatory specificity. Framing provides the interpretive structure, agenda-setting ensures visibility and repetition, and cultivation accounts for the long-term internalization of these patterns. Together, these processes explain why television news has enduring effects even in pluralistic media environments.

### 7.6 Normative Implications for Journalism and Public Life

The findings raise important normative concerns regarding the role of television news in democratic societies. While journalism plays a critical watchdog function, excessive reliance on fear-based and conflict-driven narratives may contribute to public anxiety and disengagement (Altheide, 1997). Cultivation theory suggests that such effects accumulate gradually, often without the audience's conscious awareness. These findings do not imply that journalists should avoid reporting crises or conflict. Rather, they underscore the importance of thematic framing, contextual depth, and structural explanations. Research suggests that news emphasizing broader contexts and solutions can mitigate negative cultivation effects while preserving journalistic scrutiny (McCombs, 2004).

### 7.7 Implications for Media Literacy and Future Research

Finally, the study highlights the importance of media literacy as a counterweight to cultivation effects. Audiences who understand media framing and long-term media influence may be better equipped to critically evaluate news content and resist the internalization of distorted realities (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Future research should build on these findings through longitudinal and cross-cultural designs, particularly in Global South contexts where television remains a dominant source of news. As television increasingly converges with digital platforms, examining how cultivation processes operate in hybrid media systems remains an important avenue for further inquiry.

### 8. Conclusion

This study examined the long-term effects of television news on public perceptions of social reality through the lens of cultivation theory. By synthesizing decades of empirical research, the paper demonstrates that sustained exposure to television news cultivates shared perceptions of fear, political cynicism, and institutional distrust. The findings confirm that television news influences audiences not primarily through immediate persuasion but through the gradual normalization of symbolic representations. Repetitive framing of crime, conflict, and crisis constructs a mediated reality that becomes internalized over time, shaping how audiences interpret the world around them.

The study contributes to media effects scholarship by extending cultivation theory beyond entertainment television and by integrating it with framing and agenda-setting perspectives. It highlights the need for longitudinal approaches in media research and for greater attention to the cumulative consequences of news exposure. Future research should employ cross-cultural and longitudinal designs to further explore how cultivation processes operate in evolving media ecosystems, particularly in hybrid environments where television intersects with digital platforms. Understanding these dynamics remains essential for assessing the societal role of news media in shaping public consciousness.

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