9. Cultivation and the Perceived Realism of Stories

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> The poet does not require us to be awake and believe; he solicits us only to yield ourselves to a dream and this too with our eyes open, and with our judgment *per-due* behind a curtain, ready to awaken us at the first motion of our will: and meantime, only, not to *dis*believe. (Coleridge, 1817/1907, p. 189)

Theory and research suggest that relationships between media exposure and media effects are influenced by the extent to which audience members judge media content to be realistic. One is tempted to conclude that as perceived realism increases so does media's influence. However, conceptual and methodological complications challenge too simplistic a conclusion (see Hall, 2009a). These complications fall into three interrelated categories: (1) conceptualizations of perceived realism, (2) how realism varies across different content categories (fiction, non-fiction, or reality-based) and from one genre to another within categories (e.g., reality dating or fly-on-the-wall reality), and (3) the extent to which we are by nature either disbelieving or credulous in our consumption of media content.

Cultivation theory describes how mediated stories construct reality for audience members and societies (Gerbner, 1998, 1999; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2009; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). In this chapter we are not directly concerned with the social construction of reality as cultivation theory articulates it. Instead we focus on perceived realism as the comparisons audience members

make between the constructed realities they interpret as the actual world and the representations of those realities they observe in media. We might think of perceived realism as the extent to which viewers judge that the people and events they encounter in media are portrayed as would be expected, given the socially constructed understandings of the actual world that a given viewer brings to the media experience. There are two important elements to this definition. First, it recognizes that the actual world audience members take as "reality" is a social construction based on their immediate and mediated experiences as well as their own traits and tendencies. Second, it defines perceived realism as based on an expectation audiences have of content that originates in that socially constructed reality.

An array of conceptual and operational definitions of perceived realism exists in the literature (for reviews, see Busselle & Greenberg, 2000; Potter, 1988), and scholars continue both to redefine the concept (e.g., Shapiro, Barriga, & Beren, 2010) and to question its efficacy (Pouliot & Cowen, 2007). Such a lack of consensus might suggest that scholars have yet to identify the best definition of perceived realism. We argue that this is not the case. Instead, we suggest that what constitutes realism or authenticity, and therefore perceived realism, varies depending on what one is watching. In essence, audience members use different criteria to judge realism in different media contexts. Thus, the appropriate conceptualization of perceived realism depends on the nature of realism in a given genre or content category. Further, it is not clear from the research whether viewers, listeners, or readers actively and routinely evaluate realism or only object to its absence (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). One approach suggests that individuals are incredulous by nature but suspend disbelief to a greater or lesser extent while consuming fictional stories (for an overview, see Worth, 2004). An alternative is that audiences are accepting by nature, assuming authenticity until challenged otherwise (e.g., Gerrig & Rapp, 2004). Thus, the task for media scholars with respect to realism is to understand what "realism" means in different contexts and when and under what conditions audience members make judgments about it.

Cultivation theory, with its focus on storytelling (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), is an especially useful domain for considering realism. This is because a considerable amount of research has focused on perceived realism as a moderator or mediator of cultivation effects (e.g., Busselle, 2001; Potter, 1986; Quick, 2009). It is also because cultivation theory relies on stories as the primary communicative unit of influence (Busselle, Ryabovolova, & Wilson, 2004; Gerbner, 1999). Pinpointing the story as a starting point for investigating realism helps to focus theoretical considerations related to both processes and outcomes and allows us to narrow and frame our discussion in useful ways.

In this chapter we explore the concept of perceived realism from the perspectives of cultivation theory and narrative processing. We begin with issues of definition.

Conceptualizing Realism

Scholars have generated a range of items and scales to assess audiences' interpretations of the accuracy, authenticity, or verisimilitude of media content. In doing so, they have struggled with several issues. One is a difficulty in knowing what criteria audiences use to judge realism. A second is that the criteria for judging realism may change from one genre to another. A third complication relates to the specificity of realism judgments. Judgments about specific content, such as a program or segment shown in an experimental setting, may be very different from more abstract judgments about an entire genre, such as responses to perceived realism questions asked in a survey.

These complications have contributed to a proliferation of realism items and scales that vary in at least three ways (Busselle & Greenberg, 2000). First, realism instruments purport to assess different conceptual dimensions, such as whether television reflects the reality of social interactions and situations (e.g., Dorr, Kovaric, & Doubleday, 1990; Wright, Huston, Reitz, & Piemayat, 1994), the extent to which events typically happen in real life as they are portrayed in media (Shapiro & Chock, 2003), or whether representations are plausible in the real world (Elliott, Rudd, & Good, 1983; Elliott & Slater, 1980). Second, they ask about different objects within media content, such as people, events, and behaviors (e.g., Greenberg & Reeves, 1976). Third, they ask about realism at different levels of specificity, ranging from a specific story or episode (e.g., Bahk, 2001; Slater, Rouner, & Long, 2006; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999) to genres or categories (e.g., Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985; Perse, 1990) to television in general (e.g., Busselle, 2003; Potter, 1986).

In some experimental settings realism has been manipulated rather than measured. Typically participants are shown stimulus content that is fictional or nonfictional, or they are told that the same stimulus is real or not real. In some cases the participants respond differently depending on the manipulation (e.g., Atkin, 1983; Berkowitz & Alioto, 1973; Konijn, Walma van der Molen, & van Nes, 2009), although not in all cases (e.g., Feshbach, 1976), suggesting that perceived realism is open to the interpretation of the viewer as much as the definition of the researcher (Potter, 1988).

With respect to conceptual dimensions, nearly a dozen separate terms can be found in the literature describing realism (for reviews, see Busselle & Greenberg, 2000; Potter, 1988). Early research focused on the notion of similarity when

comparing portrayals to their real world counterpart, such as police officers or teachers (e.g., Greenberg & Reeves, 1976; Wright et al., 1994) and actions or events, such as crimes or emergencies (e.g., Busselle, 2001; Reeves, 1978). This may have been under the assumption that television images which do not look or feel like the real world have no influence on perceptions of real life. In this context a portrayal was thought to be realistic if people or events were represented as they were assumed to appear in the actual world. A second element of these comparisons recognized that fictional representations may vary with respect to the likelihood or probability of people existing or events occurring (e.g., Hall, 2003; Wright et al., 1994), whether similar people or events could plausibly occur (e.g., Elliott et al., 1983), or the nature of how events would typically occur if they were to occur (Shapiro & Chock, 2003; Shapiro & Fox, 2002).

In fantasy genres there may be no apparent relation between a portrayal and the real world. Events and creatures may not exist or be possible in the real world. But, at the same time, these portrayals may seem authentic, or not inauthentic, in meaningful ways. Potter (1988) recognized a distinction between the extent to which people and objects look like modern day, real life—*syntactic* realism—and the realism of human interactions and relations, regardless of surface appearances—*semantic* realism (for a slightly different conceptualization of this distinction, see Pouliot & Cowen, 2007). For example, *Harry Potter's* Dumbledore is a 150-year-old wizard. At one level he is absurdly unrealistic and could not exist in the actual world. Yet, his grandfatherly relationship with the protagonist, Harry Potter, may seem realistic to the extent that Dumbledore's death was devastating for both Harry Potter and the audience, evoking emotions in both that are quite real.[1]

Busselle and Bilandzic (2008) outlined a number of ways in which portrayals might be seen as *un*realistic based on the potential for audiences to observe inconsistencies. They argue that a portrayal may seem unrealistic if it is inconsistent with an audience member's expectations based on previous real life experience, previous mediated experience, or previous experience with a genre or media category. Further, portrayals may seem unrealistic if the story is internally inconsistent (Hall, 2003) or incoherent (Graesser, Olde, & Klettke, 2002; Rapp & Gerrig, 2002). Here realism may depend on the extent to which people and events are logical or appropriate given earlier events and character development. Recently, Shapiro et al. (2010) demonstrated a relation between perceived realism and causal attributions made in a text about characters' behaviors, suggesting that logical inferences play a role in realism perceptions.

It is important to recognize that some studies have allowed respondents to define realism for themselves by simply asking, "how realistic" is a given program, genre, or medium. For example, Quick (2009) asked viewers of the medical

drama, *Grey's Anatomy*, to rate the series on three continua—realistic-unrealistic, believable-unbelievable, and credible-not credible—which were combined into a single scale. The study found that the scale positively mediated the relation between viewing level and favorable perceptions of doctors. One limitation of using an open definition such as this is uncertainty about what viewers mean when they report that content is realistic, believable, or credible. At the same time, there is an advantage in reducing the likelihood that a respondent does not share the researcher's definition. That is, while we may be uncertain about what realism means for viewers in a given context (e.g., to *Grey's Anatomy* viewers), the empirical evidence that realism plays a role in the relation between exposure and perception is important.

In summary, conceptualizations of perceived realism originated as judgments about the similarity of portrayed characters and events to their real world counterparts. This may have followed the assumption that content with no obvious connection to the actual world would have no influence. The concept was expanded to include assessments of the plausibility or likelihood of fictional events occurring in the actual world. Then, the concept was expanded further to recognize that even stories of fantastical people and events are "realistic" to the extent that they make sense according to an internal logic. Finally, there is some evidence that part of perceived realism is related to causal attributions suggested in a portrayal. We now turn to the nature of realism in different genres and content categories.

A Moving Target

Research on cultivation theory most frequently tests the central hypothesis that exposure to media (typically television) is related to perceptions of the actual world. Usually exposure is operationalized as hours of television viewed on an average day (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2009) or in terms of the viewing of specific genres (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008; Bilandzic & Rössler, 2004), such as soap operas (Shrum, 1996), crime-dramas (Busselle & Shrum, 2003) or action-adventure programs (Potter & Chang, 1990). Stories told in different genres vary in both topic and structure (e.g., Pyrhönen, 2007). For example romantic comedies deal with topics related to relationships and tend to follow an explication-complication-resolution structure (Lyden, 2003). Mysteries typically begin with the commission of a crime and are resolved with the revelation of the culprit and his or her method (Mittell, 2004). Our present concern is less with different genres per se than with the role of realism across the broader content categories of fiction, nonfiction, and the hybrid, reality-based genres.

With the exception of abstract media art, all media content is *representation*, usually of people (or creatures), places, and events. Representations are not reality, but "stake a claim on reality" through an implied relationship with the actual world (Grossberg, Wartella, Whitney, & Wise, 2006, p. 196). The nature of that relationship depends on the content in question and determines what judgments are available about the realism of that content.

Nonfiction has a direct relationship to specific, real people and events. Therefore, judgments related to realism are limited to the realm of accuracy and representativeness. Available criticisms focus on bias, sensationalism, or the veracity of facts (Maier, 2002; Newhagen & Nass, 1989). At a more abstract level, questions about the realism of nonfiction may focus on the representativeness of the events and facts linked to an inferred category, such as whether news reports in general represent news events as they are in life (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985; Perse, 1990) or if topics, such as crime, are exaggerated or underrepresented in news programs (Chiricos, Padgett, & Gertz, 2000). Realism judgments about both specific events and content categories assume that the people and events represented do or did exist in the actual world. Thus, realism is limited to the accuracy with which those events are reported or documented.

Conversely, fictional representations typically make no claim about specific real individuals or events. Instead, representations are linked to categories of the real world through fictional characters and events. In fiction, the realm of story elements to which accuracy can be applied is determined by the story world. Story world includes time and place as well as the logic and rules of the story. For example, modern day London is governed by the logic of the actual world, unless Jack The Ripper has time-travelled to the present from the past, in which case the story world includes the ability to time travel as well as all of the logical implications of that possibility. In a work of fiction that takes place in an actual world setting (e.g., a crime-drama), perceptions of accuracy in the form of similarity to the perceived real world likely play a larger part in realism judgments. This may be because we use the actual world as the default reality unless a representation constructs an alternative reality (Segal, 1995). For example, participants listing thoughts after viewing an episode of *Law & Order*, a modern crime-drama, were quick to notice when police officers "busted" into an apartment without a search warrant or failed to read suspects their Miranda Rights (Quintero Johnson & Busselle, 2005). As story worlds depart from the actual world, the requirement for accuracy applies to fewer elements of the representation. For example, some audience members object when a cowboy appears to have an unlimited supply of bullets in his "six-shooter," but not when a Storm Trooper's "blaster" can fire ad infinitum.

Here we can draw two conclusions. First, as the story world departs from the actual world there is a diminishing of the realm of the story to which realism vis-à-vis perceived similarity to the actual world applies. At the same time there is a limit to how much a story can deviate from the actual world because realism always applies at the level of basic human behavior and basic logic. For example, the generally accepted conventions of human behavior prohibit a character from intentionally causing his or her own death except as a result of mental illness or altruism, assuming non-altruistic suicide is always caused by some form of mental illness. Similarly, the laws of logic preclude the reversal of temporal order in causally related events; while time travel is possible in many stories, a character can never go forward in time to change the past.

The second conclusion is that as one moves from nonfiction to fiction, realism as representativeness and accuracy gives way to realism as plausibility. Shapiro and colleagues (Shapiro et al., 2010; Shapiro & Chock, 2003) have pointed out that audience members may imagine how fictional events would occur if they were to occur. In this case audiences assess realism by considering the relation between the portrayal and their image of what could or probably would happen or how people could or probably would behave under a given set of circumstances.

Existing between fiction and non-fiction are hybrid, reality-based genres (Hill, 2005; Nabi et al., 2006; Ouellette & Hay, 2008). As Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt (2003) point out, categorizing reality-based programs is difficult because there are so many variations, and new iterations are introduced with each new television season. Reality-based programs' claim on the real world differs from both fiction and nonfiction. This relationship appears to manifest in two forms. In one case ostensibly naturally occurring, real events are captured on video and replayed for the audience (e.g., *Cops, America's Funniest Home Videos*). Here, realism may depend largely on the viewer's sense that the video is not staged (Antony, 2010), which probably matters to the extent that viewers' expectations of actuality are met or violated. That is, if one expected to see actual police procedures or actual accidents, the sense that an event was staged would not meet expectations.

In another type of reality-based program events are real in the sense that they are not the product of special effects or computer-generated imagery. So when a man eats a handful of live worms, he is actually eating live worms. In this sense, the relation between the representation and the event may be more direct than is the case in traditional nonfiction. For example, news reports often do not have video of a news event itself, but only images of the aftermath and possibly eye-witness testimonies. In reality-based programming the representation is real and linked to an actual person in the real world. At the same time, the real event is staged (Hill, 2005) or manipulated

(Hall, 2009b). The staged nature of events in many reality-based genres challenges the logic of traditional realism judgments. For example, staged events are both unlikely to occur in the real world but do occur when program producers create artificial situations; these situations are both implausible in reality and do occur under artificial conditions; and events would both not happen as portrayed and apparently did happen as witnessed. In reality-based genres assessments of realism may be based on the extent to which characters or participants behave as one would expect them to, given the unrealistic or contrived situation in which they find themselves. Of course, the staged nature of reality-based programming varies. But even in so-called "fly-on-the-wall" programs, in which participants ostensibly go about their normal lives while being recorded, audience members appear to be aware that behavior may be influenced by the presence of cameras and recording devices. In interviews with reality-TV viewers, Hill (2005) found that audience members appear to adjust their expectations to account for the artificial nature of the situation presented in the program.

Nabi et al. (2007) provides an interesting illustration of how perceived realism might work in reality-based content. She asked respondents to rate 33 reality programs representing a broad range of sub-groups of the genre (e.g., crime, make-over, talent contests) on 12 dimensions, including realism. Despite the fact that all the programs were reality-based and covered a wide range of potential perceived realism—from very unrealistic to very realistic—the perception of realism was not a strong determinant of how the programs clustered in the minds of respondents. This suggests that rather than categorizing reality programming along a realism continuum, individuals adjust their interpretations of what realism means in different programs or categories.

The important point is that the variety of relationships between representations and the real world across the media landscape makes perceived realism different from other constructs of interest to communication scholars (e.g., information seeking, probability estimates, behavioral intention) because the nature of "realism" itself changes from one content category to the next. The types of judgments people may make about realism also change from one genre to the next. People "see" different genres as more or less realistic (Busselle, 2003). But more importantly, when considering different categories, people make fundamentally different kinds of realism judgments, applying different criteria and maybe using different judgment processes.

This has important implications for the issue of genre-specific cultivation effects (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008; Bilandzic & Rössler, 2004; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Audiences likely have different realism expectations about portrayals in different genres or content categories. A premise or situation may be noticeably unrealistic in one genre or context (e.g., a medical drama) but

may seem perfectly normal in another (e.g., fantasy, reality-contests). The challenge for scholars is to match conceptualization and measurement with content, context, and research focus (Konijn et al., 2009).

Real as the Default

When reflecting on his own writing of *Lyrical Ballads,* Samuel Coleridge said that he sought "…a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that *willing suspension of disbelief* for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (Coleridge, 1817/1907, p. 6, emphasis added).[2] The concept has come to represent a set of implicit assumptions about audiences' negotiations of the transition between reality and fiction. Coleridge described a willingness to believe, a withholding of rational judgment, and a willingness to reactivate judgment or "bring judgment back into play" (Bormann, 1972, p. 58). We consider these three processes in turn.

The notion of a willingness to believe, which facilitates a suspension of disbelief, requires the assumption that media consumers are incredulous by default. This assumption is questionable. Certainly, individuals may approach content skeptically, for example, when faced with content one perceives as persuasive or with news content from a distrusted source. However, even to reject media content, audiences must comprehend information before disbelieving it. Then, subsequent to comprehension, we may evaluate the veracity of that information and conclude that it is in some way flawed. However, such subsequent evaluation requires both cognitive resources and motivation (Gilbert, 1991; Gilbert & Gill, 2000; Gilbert, Tafarodi, & Malone, 1993). This reasoning prompted Prentice and Gerrig (1999) to conclude that disbelief is *constructed* rather than *suspended*. When applied to the notion of media realism, this suggests that individuals may evaluate information and conclude that it is unrealistic, but without such evaluation, story relevant information is simply accepted (Bradley & Shapiro, 2004; Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008; Shapiro et al., 2010). Indeed, Coleridge (1817/1907) foreshadowed this when referring to "…that negative faith, which simply permits the images presented to work by their own force, without either denial or affirmation of their real existence…" (p. 107).

The point is that one does not anticipate the possibility of unrealistic content, any more than one assumes that a barista cannot make a good cappuccino or that a friend's offer to buy a cappuccino is insincere. Both are possibilities, but not possibilities we necessarily consider. Moreover, if we are unaware of the possibilities, we also must be unaware of their absence or that the possibilities did not materialize. Simply stated, we cannot dismiss a possibility that we have not previously considered.

The second process suggested by Coleridge—a withholding of rational judgment—has two components. First, fictional spaces open up a possible alternative world; this, however, is not the same as falseness, against which audiences need to argue. If fictional content does not make a claim of truth, then audiences do not have to withhold judgment about falseness. Thus, we argue that audiences are not bothered by fictionality. Instead, as with any other judgment, audiences evaluate when necessary. Individuals make judgments and draw conclusions about the people and events they witness in stories, regardless of whether those stories are fictional, nonfictional, or some hybrid of the two, just as they make judgments about all types of information; we are disappointed in the woman who succumbs to an unworthy suitor, and concerned for the child who becomes separated from his mother. This is true regardless of whether it occurs in a sci-fi film, in a documentary, or in our own neighborhood as told to us by a friend.

The third process suggested by Coleridge focuses on activating rational judgment. We have argued that rational judgment is not suspended. But we have also argued that judgment about truth status is activated only when prompted or required. In order to address this we need to consider narrative processing in more detail.

Narrative Processing and Realism Judgments

Consumers of narratives are active in constructing mental models of the story world, the characters who populate that world, and the events that impact them (Bordwell, 1985; Ohler, 1994; Oatley, 2002; Zwaan, Magliano, & Graesser, 1995). Readers and viewers combine information from a text (novel, film, television program) with previously existing, story-relevant knowledge, to construct these mental representations (Prentice, Gerrig, & Bailis, 1997; Rapp, Gerrig, & Prentice, 2001). The primary activity of the reader or audience member is to progressively construct a mental representation that is coherent both with respect to earlier points in the story and with what the individual brings to the story in the form of previous knowledge and experience (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008; Graesser et al., 2002). The event-indexing model (Zwaan, Langston, & Graesser, 1995) suggests that during the process of comprehending a story, readers monitor changes in five dimensions (time, space, protagonists' identity, causality, and intentionality).[3] To the extent that these changes can be incorporated into existing mental representations, the narrative is coherent and comprehension progresses relatively smoothly. Conversely, if new information is inconsistent with existing representations then construction should be interrupted and comprehension should suffer (Albrecht & O'Brien, 1993; Zwaan, Magliano, & Graesser,

1995). Worth (2004) suggested that the consumer of narrative *creates* belief rather than suspends disbelief, and that one cannot construct a narrative world and at the same time believe that world is false.

Bordwell (1985) pointed to the hypothesis-testing nature of narrative comprehension. As new information becomes available audience members anticipate its implications for characters and events. Based on characters' traits and motivations some behaviors can be reasonably expected from a character, but others cannot (Rapp et al., 2001). In fact, some reactions would seem absurd. Consider a scenario in which a man meets two muggers on the street at night. The man is threatened at knife point and ordered to hand over his wallet. First, in the mind of the audience, the man and the muggers are neither real nor unreal. They simply are a potential victim and two muggers. Second, depending on previous character development, the audience suspects a range of possible responses from the potential victim. The victim as a sensible man may remain calm and hand over the wallet, hoping the muggers will be satisfied. The victim as a cowardly man may sob and beg for his life while forfeiting his wallet. The victim as an action hero may employ his martial arts skills to teach a lesson in retaliatory justice. Each of these responses would be coherent relative to the way the character has been developed, or the mental model of the character (Rapp et al., 2001). Comprehension of the narrative and construction of the story will progress to the extent that the man's response is consistent with the audience's expectations, given their knowledge of the character and his situation. Of course, the man's responses are not so strictly proscribed. The coward may remain calm; the sensible man may cower, and the action hero may not use violence. But the response must be consistent with the character. The coward cannot inexplicably become a martial artist and the hero cannot cower, unless the inconsistent behavior is somehow justified in the story. Moreover, unless fantastical story-world rules have been introduced, none of the men can shape-shift or become invisible.

From this one can conclude, generally, that information that is inconsistent with the characters, situations, or the story world should activate some type of realism evaluation in the audience. But without such observed inconsistency, the audience has no reason to consider the authenticity, verisimilitude, or realism of the information presented. This suggests we should fundamentally change the way we think about perceived realism. It seems unlikely that audience members assess realism in the narratives they consume, at least while consuming them. Conversely, they *should* notice if the narrative is unrealistic. This is because not being realistic manifests as inconsistency between observations and expectations. These expectations are based on what is known about characters, situations, and story worlds as well as assumptions based on real world experience. These inconsistencies should interrupt the smooth

construction of mental representations of the story, which, in turn, should lower engagement and enjoyment.

This has implications for audiences seeking programs as well as genres. For example, Papacharissi and Mendelson (2007) adapted realism items to measure "how true to life viewers understand reality [-TV] depictions to be" (p. 363). They found that the perceived realism of reality programming was positively related to hours of viewing and watching for entertainment and relaxation motivations. Thus, perceiving a lack of realism in a reality-based program, within the constraints of realism expectations about that program, may deter future viewing of similar content.

Implications for Perceived Realism and Cultivation Research

Research into the perceived realism of media and its role in media effects has focused on the extent to which audiences find what they consume to be realistic. Gerbner and Gross (1976) argued that "viewers assume [television stories] take place against the backdrop of reality" and wondered "how often and to what degree viewers suspend their disbelief in the reality of the symbolic world" (p. 178). Potter (1986) concluded that "viewers who believe that televised content is real are more likely to be influenced by it than viewers who believe the content to be fictional or stylized" (p. 161). This assumption of active realism monitoring also is apparent in the most recent research (e.g., Barriga, Shapiro, & Jhaveri, 2009; Konijn et al., 2009; Quick, 2009; Shapiro et al., 2010) and prevails across research into different content areas including non-fiction (e.g., Chiricos et al., 2000), fiction (e.g., Quick, 2009), reality-based content (Nabi et al., 2006), and even public service announcements (e.g., Pinkleton, Austin, & Van de Vord, 2010).

Conventional wisdom suggests that mediated stories are taken as fundamentally different from real world events. Then the two somehow become confused, or one is recognized as a reflection of the other, resulting in the mediated world contaminating understandings of the actual world. However, our arguments suggest that mediated and actual worlds are not perceived as fundamentally different, at least as they are being experienced. For example, as we have argued elsewhere, while watching a mystery, viewers do not think of a detective as a fictional detective or a realistic detective. They think of him or her only as a detective trying to solve a crime (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Given this, it may be more productive to ask how often, under what conditions, and to what effect viewers find content to be *un*realistic. There are a number of reasons to consider changing our focus from realism to unrealism.

First, when we measure other communication-related constructs, such as an attitude, we assume that the construct is salient or will become salient in the future, perhaps in a purchase or voting decision. However, perceived realism may be an example of what we have referred to as an "asymmetrical" construct, one that individuals become aware of only when it is in a negative state (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). This may be true of attention and understanding as well as realism; we typically are not consciously aware that we are paying attention, that we understand, or that something is realistic. Instead, we become aware only when our attention wanes, when we have difficulty understanding, or when a portrayal seems unrealistic. If this is the case, common realism measures do not directly measure the construct of interest—observed unrealism. Instead, at best, they indirectly measure its absence. The implication here is that cultivation surveys that measure realism may capture very little of the unrealism respondents observe while viewing. The unrealism observed in data may be more a reaction to generalizations about genres or social desirability related to negative opinions about the medium than instances of actually observing in stories some lack of authenticity. One suggestion to address this is the development of measures that more directly assess *un*realism. One might ask respondents, for example, if they recall thinking that anything about a medical drama seemed implausible or hard to believe. This may take the form of a counter-arguing measure (e.g., Jacks & Cameron, 2003; Wellins & McGinnies, 1977) through a prompted thought listing procedure. Such a measure may be useful because perceived unrealism judgments could be thought of as a manifestation of counter-arguing in narrative context. A similar alternative may be to ask respondents how often they find themselves thinking that a story or portrayal is inaccurate or inauthentic. We might find that people who report "often" or "very often" are less susceptible to cultivation-type effects than those who say "never" or "rarely."

Second, if viewers do not evaluate the realism of content and do not conceive of it as a continuum ranging from less to more realistic then realism cannot moderate cultivation in the sense we typically think of. Shrum (2001) demonstrated that television exposure has little influence on social judgments when viewers are made aware that their judgments may be based on television sources or examples. It appears that respondents dismiss these sources, upon reflection, as somehow unreliable or irrelevant. A similar but reverse process may be at work with perceived realism. When participants are asked about content realism, an evaluation process is activated that otherwise may remain dormant. If the default state is acceptance when realism judgments are dormant, then merely asking the question may activate a process that can only move the judgment toward the negative. That is, if the default is acceptance, then the accurate response on a scale would be the most positive option. But when realism judgments are

prompted respondents may search for evidence that content is unrealistic—evidence that may be unrelated or tangentially related to the process of cultivation and may indicate response values that suggest moderate levels of perceived realism, which inaccurately reflect the acceptance that typically occurs during viewing. Thus, asking about the perceived realism of content may activate a process and introduce variance that is not present under real world conditions.

Third, the proposition that people are susceptible to media effects such as cultivation *unless* they perceive content to be unrealistic (and that perceiving content as unrealistic may be more the exception than the rule) is consistent with research in narrative persuasion. That research has shown that higher levels of transportation or absorption in stories positively relate to changes in beliefs and attitudes (Appel & Richter, 2010; Escalas, 2007; Green & Brock, 2000, Vaughn, Hesse, Petkova, & Trudeau, 2009). From this we might suspect that stories which are more engaging play a stronger role in the cultivation process. There are two reasons for this. First, if noticing instances of unrealism is distracting and interferes with engagement and enjoyment, it also should interfere with a story's influence on attitudes and beliefs about the real world. Moreover, to the extent that viewers choose content that is rewarding and avoid content that is not, viewers should avoid content they perceive as unrealistic for the very reason that it is less engaging and enjoyable. Thus, over time, individuals' overall viewing patterns should tend to move away from content they perceive to be unrealistic (given their own expectations for that content) and toward that which does not promote evaluations or judgments related to realism. Put simply, we should expect people to gravitate toward content that does not fail to meet their implicit expectations of authenticity. If this is the case, realism may not mediate cultivation in a traditional, statistical sense, but in a way that is more consistent with cultivation theory itself. Specifically, the effect of perceived *un*realism should be to guide individuals' media choices toward content they find more engaging, more enjoyable, more consistent with their extant perceptions of reality, and ultimately to content that is more likely to contribute to and reinforce the social construction of the perceived "real" world.

Notes

1. For discussions of emotions in fictional contexts, see Gendler and Kovakovich (2005) and Tan (1996).
2. Coleridge was referring to *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection of poems by Samuel Coleridge and William Wordsworth, published in 1798.
3. There are a number of different theoretical models that fall under this constructionist paradigm (Graesser et al., 2002). While they differ in the specific mechanisms they describe, each proposes some type of construction or integration process in which the individual must make sense of incoming information in light of existing knowledge.

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