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BROTHERS & SISTERS:
A NEW IMPETUS FOR SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION
AND ITS IMPACT ON TRADITIONAL CULTIVATION ANALYSIS

by

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ABSTRACT

Scholars recognize television's ability to influence culture. According to Gerbner, television creates socially constructed realities through the cultivation of its viewers. Television is designed to satisfy the diverse needs of large audiences. The mainstream messages conveyed via television have power to alter perceptions and change culture. Gerbner's theory was constructed from the analysis of crime dramas with single plot lines. Using the ABC television program *Brothers & Sisters*, this thesis explores the theoretical implications dramas with multiple plot lines have on traditional notions of cultivation theory. Through a content analysis and focus groups, evidence was acquired to suggest that cultivation theory, with the added consideration of involvement, is still able to explain television's influence on the social creation of reality.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

At its core, "culture" is a dynamic body of commonalities in tastes and preferences within a community or group of communities. Communication scholar George Gerbner (1990) eloquently stated that "Culture is a symbolic organization that cultivates our conceptions of existence, priorities, values, and relationships. We derive from it notions of what is; what is important; what is good, bad, or endowed with other qualities; and what is related to what" (p. 251). Culture, therefore, is a powerful force as it provides community members with a sense of rightness and wrongness, as well as an organized set of expectations. From a global level to a national level to a local level, community members are tied together through cultural practices and shared ideas. The purpose of this thesis is to apply cultivation theory, a communication theory that seeks to explain the creation of socially constructed cultures, to a study focused on political cultivation resulting from the television program *Brothers & Sisters*. Through the use of a content analysis and focus groups, this investigation will attempt to uncover any implications that this genre of programming may have on traditional cultivation theory. The scope of this thesis is to highlight the challenges for cultivation scholars and not the precise level of cultivation present in the audience of *Brothers & Sisters*.

ABC's hit drama *Brothers & Sisters* began its second season in the fall of 2007. The show centers on the interactions of an affluent family as its members deal with the death of their patriarch and the secrets he left behind. As viewers get to know the Walker family, the family's political ideas are under constant scrutiny. Half of the family is staunchly conservative while the other half is vehemently liberal. Each member of the family represents a major issue facing the nation today. Oldest sister Sarah is the president of the successful family agricultural business. Brother Tommy is an entrepreneur who struggles to finance a new business venture. Sister Kitty,

who begins the series as a conservative pundit on a cable news program, concludes the first season as the communications director for a Republican senator representing California. Brother Kevin is a gay attorney disgruntled that he cannot get married. Youngest brother Justin is an Afghanistan veteran who is ordered to fight in Iraq. The family matriarch Nora wants only for her children to be happy in the wake of her husband's death but does not agree with Kitty's politics or Justin's military service. A unique feature of this show is that the political dialogue revolves around current policy debates of our nation. References are made to President George W. Bush and his agenda. Aspects of the War on Terror are discussed in almost every episode, as is the economy. Everything else about the show, however, is fictional. Even the show's U.S. senator, Robert McCallister, is fictional. This show seemingly merges real-time fact and fiction into a one-hour weekly drama program for mainstream consumption.

Background

Communication as a comprehensive discipline is concerned with how people communicate culture and within culture. The study of culture, however, does not end there. Mass communication, a subset discipline within the field of communication, has direct ties to facilitating and maintaining culture. In fact, mass communication may even be responsible for creating and spreading new cultural ideals. One mass communication medium of scholarly research for this phenomenon is television. Many communication scholars concur that television is a dominant culture shaper because of its prevalence in our lives and its far-reaching accessibility (Russell, Norman & Heckler, 2004, p. 276-277). Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1986) argued that television "is part and parcel of our daily lives. Its drama, commercials, news, and other programs bring a relatively coherent world of common images and

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messages into every home" (p. 18). These researchers found that, in an average home, the television is on at least seven hours a day and that each family member more than two years old within a household consumes more than four hours of television daily (p. 19).

One reason for television's prevalence is simply the myriad of functions it serves. Television obviously serves an entertainment function. Gerbner et al. (1986) stated that "Television is a centralized system of storytelling" (p. 18). Most television consumers use television for entertainment purposes. Common genres for entertainment include situational comedies, dramas, made-for-television movies, and sporting events. Television networks also broadcast feature films and Hollywood blockbusters after the movies leave theaters.

As explained by Kellner (1981), television serves as a political forum. A two-fold political function is created because television is a corporate industry controlled by boardrooms and advertisers, although the television airwaves are for public consumption. Even with the advent of the Internet, television is still a chief source for news information during the course of a political campaign or policy debate. In some ways, the Internet merely enhances the information presented in nightly news broadcasts and major events. For example, more people learned news about Princess Diana's funeral and the 9/11 attacks from television than from other news sources (see Brown, Basil & Bocarnea (2003) and Kanihan & Gale (2003)). Not only does the television allow for political dialogue, but it also sets the agenda for policy debate. During the civil rights movement of the 1960s, television was instrumental, as opposed to newspapers, in disseminating the messages of the policy debate, even though the images displayed were contradictory to majority values (Kellner, 1981, pp. 42-46). In agenda-setting fashion, it is as if corporate executives use television programming to act out their own policy debate. "It is therefore mistaken to define television as a monolithic tool of a unified ruling class. Instead,

television reflects divisions and conflicts within the ruling class and the entire society about the direction of public policy" (p. 45). Just as networks compete against one another for viewers, competition occurs among the networks for the dissemination of political ideals and values. The thoughts and beliefs held in one boardroom most likely differ in another. Beyond that, the thoughts and beliefs in one network's boardroom may drastically differ from those in the production booth. In short, television is both a venue and medium for political discussion.

Television also allows viewers to meet their psychological and social needs. Using a gratification approach to television, programming often provides viewers with a variety of emotional needs. Stephenson (1967), when developing his "play theory," determined that the use of television resulted in "communication pleasure," even when used to get information about painful events, such as news about President John F. Kennedy's assassination and funeral. Riggs (1996) found that television is used psychologically as a form of companionship, especially among the elderly. Humans are communal by nature, and television often satisfies those needs in lieu of actual social interaction. Furthermore, television gives viewers a forum to sort out negative feelings or distraction from negative situations (Rubin, 2002, p. 536). Riggs (1996) also researched the social role that television has in providing topics of conversation among peers. In one study, Dordick & Rachlin (1997) noted that television, through ownership and who selects what to watch within a group, creates a social hierarchy and gives order to a group. In addition, television often provides viewers with insight into gaining entry into socially pleasing or socially acceptable groups, usually through reinforcement of consumer behavior (O'Donohoe, 1993).

A final major function of television is its ability to preserve, maintain, and change culture. Similar to Gibian's (1997) "malling of America," television is a leading purveyor of a mass culture because of its accessibility and mainstreaming effects (p. 241). To meet the

preferences of a diverse audience, television must appeal to all tastes. This notion, as suggested by Gerbner et al. (1986) and discussed more fully later in this thesis, has great power to produce a mass culture. Akin to the sociological functions of television, consumer behavior and consumption produces a homogenous culture constructed out of similar tastes, wants, and needs. One study by Weispfenning (2003) on television reruns, i.e., programming re-airing at a latter time after the original air date, found that reruns serve distinct cultural purposes. According to the study, reruns serve a cross-generational informing role, a social continuity role, and a collective memory role. "Television, as the dominant electronic mass medium of the post-World War II era, may play a unique role in this discussion of cultural preservation and dissemination, particularly as it relates to the widespread use of rerun programming. Reruns preserve the culture of a specific time and place for those who lived in that culture, but they can also disseminate that culture to other areas and other generations" (p. 168). According to Weispfenning study, television acts as a time capsule by preserving past and present perceptions of culture and catalogs those perceptions for future reference.

These functions, in turn, create many economic, political, psychological, sociological, and cultural implications. Almost every television viewer has at least one program he or she enjoys watching. Some even go so far as to learn more about the actors, characters, and technical aspects of the program. This interest and research in a program may lead to a cult-like following of the program. Russell, Norman, and Heckler (2004) attempted to "explore how television viewers build relationships, loyalty, and connections with 'their' shows, with the characters portrayed in the story lines, and with fellow audience members" (p. 275). Fan sites, hosted by socialization Web sites such as Facebook, Google Groups, television network Web sites, and Web-savvy fans are prevalent online and allow viewers separated by distance to connect because

of their interest in a certain program. Some viewers, however, do not recognize the television screen barrier separating them from their favorite television show. In some cases, viewers are hard pressed to distinguish the difference between reality and the fiction presented on television. This phenomenon, because of the roles television serve, has the ability to bring about major cultural shifts within a community.

CHAPTER 2: THEORY

Because television has fully integrated into the course of daily life, its impact on viewers'
understanding of culture is far reaching. To study the phenomenon associated with the
development of cultural perspectives via exposure to television, Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and
Signorielli (1986) sought to understand the long-term socialization outcomes from television
viewing. Gerbner's early work found that there is a correlation between the amount of television
consumed and one's perception of reality, a phenomenon he termed "cultivation." In essence,
Gerbner found that high amounts of television consumption resulted in a higher likelihood of a
skewed perception of reality. Adversely, low amounts of television consumption resulted in a
more accurate perception of reality. In other words, cultivation theory attempts to explain and
predict attitude and perception variance between reality and displayed messages because of
media consumption. The foundation of Gerbner's work related to viewer perceptions gleaned
from television programming and the broadcast of violence. Although Gerbner and his
colleagues intended for a broader application of cultivation theory, he found the theory best lent
itself to the study of violence. This, however, does not negate the importance of applying
cultivation to other themes depicted in the media.

Before cultivation theory is explored, it is necessary to define an important term: social
constructionism. This term is important because it goes to the heart of creating and maintaining
culture, as this research contends television does. Social constructionism is based on the notion
that meaning and value are initiated, maintained, and shared within a community or context.
Social constructionism "places communication at the center of social processes and conversation
as the basic unit through which meaning, structure, and action emerge" (Cooks, 2000, p. 201). In
other words, communication serves as the impetus for an accepted social meaning. Meanings and

values are negotiated between speaker(s) and receiver(s) and are made relevant to all members of a given community. According to social constructionist theory, Pearce asserted that "when we communicate we are not just talking about the world, we are literally participating in the creation of the social universe" (as cited in Cooks, 2000, p. 201). In this application, television is both the medium and venue for a socially constructed reality. Cultivation theory provides a foundation for understanding how a socially constructed reality is formed and what implications it poses for any given culture.

The Cultural Indicators Project was completed in 1967-68 under the auspice of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (the Commission). Since the original report was published, the project has continued under the sponsorships of the U.S. Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, the National Institute of Mental Health, the White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, the American Medical Association, the U.S. Administration on Aging, and the National Science Foundation, among many other organizations (Gerbner et al., 2002, p. 46). The report was published at the request of President Lyndon B. Johnson, who inaugurated the Commission. The Commission's main goal was to study the social and psychological effects that violence in the media had on various segments of society. When studying the effects of violence on children, Gerbner and his colleagues began early investigations into the theory of cultivation.

On October 16, 1968, Gerbner was called to testify before the Commission regarding his work on the influence that television has on the perception of violence. During his testimony, Gerbner asserted that "television has transformed the political life of the nation, has changed the daily habits of our people, has moulded the style of the generation, made overnight global phenomena out of local happenings, redirected the flow of information and values from

traditional channels into centralized networks reaching into every home" (as cited in Baker &

Ball, 1969, p. 53). To Gerbner, this notion held the answer as to why television was such a

powerful medium and worthy of intense study. He even drew comparisons between television

and the other human innovations of fire, the wheel, the printing press, and atomic energy (p. 53).

Gerbner charged to the Commission and scholars that the study of cultivation was important

because of the "schooling" feature of television (p. 54). "So it is in this way we try to reconstruct

the informal curriculum of our culture, to try to answer such questions as what aspects of life,

subjects, perspectives, choices are being cultivated, what kinds of proportions of properties and

qualities are these choices weighted with, and what are some of these underlying structures of

associations in these large message systems?" (p. 56). As a result, Gerbner and his colleagues

developed a theoretical orientation to examine the questions and evidence he proposed before the

Commission.

In developing the theoretical base for cultivation theory, Gerbner et al. (1984, p. 22) used

a three-pronged approach. The first prong, institutional process analysis, is a study into the

formation of media messages and the policy framework used by the message maker. This prong

is the most difficult to research because of its direct connection to policy formation. The second

prong, called message system analysis, is a systematic content analysis of media content to

understand the world created by television. Cultivation analysis, the final prong, is a survey

process in which researchers analyze participant responses for variations between the real world

and television world. Using a formula between message system analysis and cultivation analysis,

a cultivation differential can then be determined to identify the level of cultivation. The amount

of television viewing also factors into the level of cultivation.

It is important to note that cultivation is not an effects study per se. Cultivation theory is more concerned with the long-term outcomes of exposure to media messages than the short-term effects of media messages, such as the approach of theories based on uses and gratification or cognitive dissonance. This focus on long-term outcomes is underpinned by "the distinctive features of television: massive, long-term and common exposure of large and heterogeneous publics to centrally produced, mass-distributed, and repetitive systems of stories" (Gerbner et al., 1986, p. 20). For long-lasting attitude change to occur, long-term exposure is required. Cultivation theory seeks to measure not only the cultivation of an individual but also the cultivation over time for an entire society. As Gerbner et al. stated, "Culture cultivates the social relationships of a society" (p. 21). The process for these outcomes is akin to social constructionism in that meaning is negotiated over time and common acceptance of negotiated meanings is adopted into a culture.

In their work on cultivation, Gerbner et al. (1986) found that cultivation is possible and so widespread simply because of how television is tailored. Television, for most cable subscribers, is finite. A select set of channels offers a single line-up of programming. Viewers are limited to those channels. To reach everyone who watches television, programming has to satisfy the lowest common denominator in terms of tastes and preferences. Known as mainstreaming, television programming is based on limited messages and messages that appeal to the broadest number of attitudes. "Television's goal of greatest audience appeal at least cost demands that most of its messages follow conventional social morality" (p. 21). In a homogenizing way, mainstreaming attempts to blur any political, social, or demographic differences among viewers (p. 31). For example, imagine a poll were taken by viewers of show *X* regarding their feelings about the color of the main character's shirt. Of the 100 people surveyed,

50% agreed the character's shirt color should be red while 50% agreed her shirt should be blue. In a second question, all survey participants said that the color green was an *acceptable* color for the character's shirt. To not alienate 50% of their viewership, the show producers decide to dress the main character in a green shirt. This elementary illustration perfectly demonstrates the power of mainstreaming. In order to prevent viewer conflict, frustration, or alienation, the show took a socially pleasing avenue.

Just as mainstreaming is vital to cultivation theory, another key term is resonance. Simply put, resonance is a "double dose" of interactions of reality and media messages (Signorielli & Morgan, 1996, p. 117). A common example in the literature, and one that supports the research on cultivation, is based on crime. Those who watch crime on television are likely to believe the world is more violent than it really is. Known as the "mean world syndrome," this phenomenon is more sensitive for those viewers who watch crime on television and live in a high crime area. These viewers are bombarded with messages from the media as well as their own perceptions from their communities. Cultivation for these viewers is likely to be more pronounced and identifiable. Perceptions can be skewed because of the amount of crime in one's neighborhood even if no crime television is consumed. But according to Gerbner et al. (1986), "To the extent that television dominates their sources of information, continued exposure to its messages is likely to reiterate, confirm, and nourish (i.e., cultivate) their values and perspectives" (p. 23-24). The combination of exposure to reality and media messages creates a cultivation differential. Greater exposure to reality will most likely result in a more accurate perception of reality, or the real world answer. Greater exposure to media messages from television will most likely result in a more skewed perception of reality, or what Gerbner labeled the "television answer" (Gerbner et al., 2002, p. 47). The larger the differential, the greater the amount of cultivation. This

differential is principle in understanding how cultivation affects a viewer's (or viewers') construction of a social reality. "Any resulting relationship between amount of viewing and the tendency to respond to these questions according to television's portrayals (with other things held constant) illuminates television's contribution to viewers' conceptions of social reality" (Gerbner, 1986, p. 27). To be revisited later, this illustrates the power of cultivation to incur consequences, both positive and negative, in culture development and maintenance.

The theory postulated above by Gerbner and his associates clearly explains television's power to change viewer perceptions. This happens because television, at least from a consumerism sense, is not a venue for extremism or radicalism. Its content is predictable but thought provoking. This combination allows viewers to identify with characters and understand character behaviors, as well as the opportunity to reconcile the emotional and psychological twists presented in a given show's plot line. The theory, as described by Gerbner et. al, (1986) will serve as the theoretical base for this thesis.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

Simply put, cultivation theory as originally envisioned by Gerbner et al. (1986) is a paradigm that attempts to explain how television viewers reconcile the real world they know with the television world they see. According to the theory, there is a positive relationship between a viewer's level of exposure and the likelihood that his or her perceptions will reflect what is broadcast on television. Since the original application of cultivation theory in the Cultural Indicators Project, scholars have critiqued Gerbner's approach. Many of these scholars have attempted to highlight the strengths, weakness, and conceptual flaws of the theory.

To build on Gerbner's work, Dominick (1973) used a content analysis of primetime programming to study the portrayal of crime and violence on television to determine if television programming accurately depicted the crime and violence of the real world. Dominick found that the frequency of television crimes was not directly related to the frequency of crimes in real life. For instance, although murder was the most frequent crime portrayed on television, murder was actually the seventh most commonly occurring crime in real life. In terms of depicting criminals, television criminals are typically older and more often white than real-world criminals, who are usually younger and non-white. Dominick also found similar trends when analyzing the role of victims on television. Using FBI documentation, Dominick found that television violence was usually committed against strangers while, in real life, 25% to 30% of violent acts are committed against relatives. Dominick's findings built on Gerbner's findings that television attempts to make crime and violence "less disturbing" to viewers by giving their minds time to rationalize their perceptions. Dominick also noted that the presence of white criminals kept other social groups from becoming stereotyped and stigmatized. According to Dominick, the television criminal "is a one-dimensional caricature, carefully drawn to be as unoffensive [sic] as possible.

The province of TV crime is left to the group with the least grounds for complaint in society and the most access to political power – the white, young adult, middle-class males" (p. 250). He also described how crime on television was distanced from normal citizens and that television crime was rarely successful.

A highly critical study by Hughes (1980) sought to explain the flaws of cultivation theory as developed by Gerbner et al. (as cited by Hughes, 1980). Hughes's first major contention was that Gerbner's approach did not provide for other variables that could be able to account for any cultivation effects. For instance, high television viewing is not the only factor that can cause alienation; race or busy work schedules can also cause alienation. Hughes also argued that Gerbner failed to account for other associations, such as church membership. By recoding Gerbner's survey results and factoring in these new control variables, Hughes found that some relationships either reversed or narrowed. For instance, Hughes discovered that moderate television viewers were more likely than heavy or light viewers to feel alienated because of cultivation's curvilinear relationship between exposure and perceptions. Hughes, in his critique, also brought into question the foundation of cultivation theory. Hughes wondered whether Gerbner's assumptions were flawed. More specifically, Hughes used previous research on the social function of television to argue that those who watch more television will be more in tune with American culture. If this is true, then it is difficult to objectify the "television answer." Hughes suggested three ideas on the flaws of cultivation theory. First, he suggested that cultivation theory is incorrect and that television serves only a functional role in spreading culture. Second, he posited that cultivation theory is correct but Gerbner did not test it correctly. Finally, Hughes argued that cultivation theory is an oversimplified explanation of how television uses culture to affect behavior. "That is, television in American society may be related to the

diffusion of culture and to alterations in social structure, both of which affect behavior of virtually all persons in the society regardless of how much television they watch" (pp. 300-301). In summation, Hughes's belief that cultivation theory contains several flaws opens the theory to the possibility its assumptions are incorrect.

Similarly, Adoni and Mane (1984) focused on the cultivation outcomes of mass media in the social construction of reality. To Adoni and Mane, the process of creating a social reality occurs through social interaction and is of a dialectical nature where humans act as both the creators and products of what they create. There were three main forms of reality used in this study. The first was "objective" reality, which exists through the discovery of facts free of the individual. The second was "symbolic" reality, which is an expression or representation of the objective reality. The final type of reality was a fusion of the objective and the symbolic and is called "subjective" social reality. This merger is the internalization of the objective reality and the symbolic reality, and meaning is applied by the individual. Although Adoni and Mane agreed that cultivation theory is the most comprehensive theory in understanding the social construction of reality, they took time to mention two major pitfalls of cultivation theory. First, Gerbner et al. (as cited by Adoni & Mane, 1984) did not factor in other social and economic variables aside from their study of crime perception. Second, cultivation theory includes an inherent conceptual gap between macrosocial and microsocial variables because macrosocial notions are abstract and difficult to objectively define. Although Adoni and Mane merely hypothesized about the limitations of cultivation theory, valid concerns were expressed about the methodological challenges of the theory.

Hawkins and Pingree (1990) attempted to provide a psychological context for cultivation. They argued that cultivation is caused by a multitude of factors, one of the chief factors being

psychological influences. Because cultivation occurs over a long period of time with reoccurring patterns, Hawkins and Pingree used the psychological ideas of learning and reinforcement to build a case for cultivation effects in terms of creating a social reality. Through long-, short-, and intermediate-term psychological effects, Hawkins and Pingree established a test to empirically examine the data. By distinguishing between first-order beliefs (beliefs derived from facts given on television) and second-order beliefs (beliefs derived from inferences made from facts given on television), scholars may be able to better understand the psychological processes of cultivation. The work of Hawkins and Pingree possesses heuristic value to the study of cultivation. The discussion posed by the two researchers was strictly theoretical, and no idea presented was substantiated with empirical evidence.

Directly combining Gerbner's (as cited by Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2006) ideas of cultivation theory and social constructionism, Hetsroni and Tukachinsky (2006) attempted to measure the far-reaching effects that television programming causes in an audience's construction of a social reality. These two researchers wanted to see if television viewers had different perceptions of real world situations and the same situations as shown on television during primetime programming. They believed that Gerbner's approach to cultivation did not effectively describe the level of cultivation that may occur as a result of varying degrees of exposure. In their results, Hetsroni and Tukachinsky categorized their participants into five groups to assess the level of cultivation. The first group was labeled as "simple cultivation," which is closely akin to Gerbner's approach in that participants "view the real world as a replica of the TV world" (p. 142). Simply put, when asked to give their perceptions of crime in real life, respondents said they believed that real life paralleled what the television depicted. A second group was labeled as "overcultivation" because participants overestimated the occurrence of

crime on television and in real life. A third group was labeled "double distortion" because participants' views on crime on television were already biased (assumed crime was too prevalent on television), causing them to overestimate the occurrence of crime in real life. A fourth group was labeled "simple no cultivation" because participants correctly estimated the occurrence of crime in real life and on television. A final group was labeled "distorted no cultivation" because respondents used real-world estimates to estimate the prevalence of crime on television. The researchers noted that the amount of television viewing may have affected an individual's classification. Light television viewers were most likely in the "distorted no cultivation" group. Light-to-moderate television viewers were likely to fall in the "simple no cultivation" group. Moderate-to-heavy television viewers were labeled either "simple cultivation" or "double distortion." Heavy television viewers were likely classified as "overcultivation." The work of Hetsroni and Tukachinsky shows the evolving scope of cultivation as media consumption habits and thought patterns grow more complex.

The essence of cultivation theory has been validated through these scholars' evaluation. Scholars agree that there is some level of correlation between exposure to television and social perceptions. Many disagree, however, about cultivation methodologies and the reliability of results produced. To some, identifying the psychological processes resulting in cultivation is difficult to determine through a quantitative approach. To others, television is only one factor out of many that may influence one in making sense of reality and cannot be singled out as the leading source. Methodological discussion, while better defining cultivation, ignores the implications that emerging modern communication has on traditional cultivation theory. To bring about the longevity of cultivation theory, scholars must revisit the scope, utility, and flexibility of cultivation theory. One way to do this is to shift past research focus onto new media themes,

such as politics or love, which tend to be more abstract, as Gerbner (1990) suggested, and

incorporate the findings into traditional cultivation theory.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH QUESTION

With the theoretical debate under way, it is obvious that scholars are facing new theoretical implications by subjecting abstract themes from modern television programming to the rigor of cultivation analysis. Some scholars have started to apply cultivation theory to new themes, such as consumer behavior (see O'Guinn, Faber, Curias, & Schmitt (1989)). As suggested, scholars are enthralled in a debate over the psychological processes that lead to cultivation as well as the reliability of cultivation analyses findings. One of the chief concerns in the research literature is the application of cultivation theory to themes beyond crime and violence. In the very early stages of cultivation theory development, however, Gerbner and his colleagues (1984, 1986) proposed that cultivation theory could extend beyond research on violence in the media. "Some of the most interesting and important topics and issues for cultivation analysis involve the symbolic transformation of message system data into hypotheses about more general issues and assumptions" (1986, p. 28). As Gerbner found in his research, violence became a prime example of a subject matter that could easily be used to measure and support cultivation.

Many scholars have focused their research only on expanding Gerbner's work within the context of violence. But what about other subjects and their depiction in modern popular television programming? For example, *The West Wing*, an NBC program airing from 1999-2006, gave the world a fictional glimpse into the highly secretive environment of the White House. Another NBC program-turned-franchise, *Law and Order* (and all of its spinoffs), not only shows violence in New York City but also gives viewers insight into a justice system that usually prevails. A final modern example is another NBC program, *ER*. This drama, which began airing in 1994 and recently started its 14th season, exposes viewers to complicated surgical procedures

that save lives. Each of these programs could serve as a starting point for cultivation research on a topic that is not about violence. Examples from television past include *M*A*S*H*, *The Wonder Years*, and *Family Ties*. Each of these programs allow viewers to form an opinion or view on a subject with which they may have little experience or interest. In other words, viewers of these programs are likely to build or renegotiate their socially constructed realities based on the facts and situations presented in these programs.

One field of study in which Gerbner began to venture was the cultivation of political ideals. Television is often a source for political newsgathering. Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1984) merged their previous work on television cultivation theory with evolving use of television as a source of political newsgathering. Gerbner et al. were quick to point out that news viewers often watch other programming. "Thus whatever they get out of their exposure can also be attributed to dramatic fare, which makes up the bulk of viewing, and which, with its portrayal of crime, courtrooms, and conflict-ridden urban like, may well be a principal contributor to basic political orientations" (p. 284). Gerbner et al. also noted the powerful operation of television to create socially accepted political labels.

In terms of political cultivation, Gerbner et al. maintained that those who watched more television were most likely to identify themselves as politically moderate. This mainstreaming effect, or "a convergence of conceptions and attitudes held by the heavy viewers of different groups who share little besides the television," is a lowest common denominator approach for broad appeal and social acceptance (p. 286). After analyzing several surveys, Gerbner et al. found that their hypothesis was true and that there was a cultivation effect in that those who watched more television were likely to describe themselves as politically moderate. "In general, television cultivates 'moderate' self-designations and a convergence upon the political

mainstream. But that does not necessarily mean that television is a force for genuine moderation" (p. 289). This notion is important to this thesis because it attempts to apply cultivation theory to the development of personal political views. As Gerbner et al. (1984) noted, political self-designation may not occur because of true convictions but because it is how viewers perceive the world because of television.

Many prime-time drama television shows, although sometimes modeled after real events, are fictional visions of writers and producers. Programs such as *Law and Order* and *The West Wing* depict real institutions but the stories are told by fictional characters acting out scenes that may be only reminiscent of real life. In *The West Wing*, President Jed Bartlett, members of Congress, and other officials are entirely fictional. Even some countries are entirely made up and are accompanied by imaginary maps. This is especially true of nations in conflict with the United States. The Kingdom of Qumar is one such example, as a fictional Middle Eastern nation in constant conflict with the U.S. The institution of the presidency is real, but *The West Wing* depicts it in a way that is fictional. Although some aspects of the show are real, rarely do non-fictional show components serve as the crux of the episode or plot. Similarly, *Law and Order* represents a real-life institution: the New York City criminal justice system. The show often illustrates flaws in the system, but the entire system is never shown. Viewers are given the show in an hour long segment, each of which focuses on one case at a time. *ER*, likewise, shows fictional doctors and nurses appearing to execute real surgical procedures on fictional injured or ill patients. Viewers are shown that not all patients live, but the procedures appear to be simple, leaving some viewers with the impression they could diagnose the illness or perform the procedures themselves in case of an emergency. There is, however, one current show that takes the thematic concept of basing a fictional show on a real institution one step further.

Brothers & Sisters joined ABC's programming prime-time line-up on September 24, 2006. The show follows the lives of the Walkers, a wealthy family living in Los Angeles, California. *Variety* reporter Brian Lowry (2006) noted that "*Brothers & Sisters* tosses very talented actors into a flaccid family soap, chronicling the lives and loves of the Walker clan, who seek to prove that blood is thicker than politics" (p. 76). In preparation for the show's debut, critics were skeptical that the show would succeed. Lowry acknowledged the show's rough start. Neglecting the show's plot, he contended, "The only reason not to dismiss the show out of hand hinges on its marquee cast and plum timeslot" (p. 76). Commenting on the show's political plot, he also likened the show's ampersand to the one found in the name of a Fox News program, *Hannity & Colmes*. *New York Times* reporter Edward Wyatt (2006) discussed the ways that executive producer and director Ken Olin tried to overcome the show's pre-production struggles. To keep the show alive, the pilot was reshot after many of the original characters were recast. Three headliners were brought in to increase the viability of the family drama. Sally Field, Calista Flockhart, and Rachel Griffiths were cast as pivotal characters in the plot. *USA Today* critic Robert Bianco (2006), who gave the pilot episode three stars out of four, wrote that "*Brothers & Sisters* is neither as bad as you might expect given that troubled history nor as good as you might hope given the talents involved" (p. 19D). Bianco even suggested that the show may want to downplay the family's obvious political divide. Even more scathing, *Boston Globe* critic Matthew Gilbert (2006) discussed how his "eyes strained to stay open" (p. D1).

Viewers, however, disagreed with the critics. With an audience base of over 11 million people, ABC was not reluctant to keep the show (AAP, 2007). Within one month of the show's premiere, *Brothers & Sisters* was the second-highest rated new series among viewers ages 18 to 49. Most of this popularity is built-in since the program was scheduled in the timeslot after

ABC's flagship show *Desperate Housewives*. One reason for the show's success with viewers is the show's many real-life themes. In speaking on the war in Iraq, show creator Jon Robin Baitz said he thought that "the war is such a daily presence in American life now that it felt right to reflect on all of these young men and women fighting" and that "it's an enormous part of what we discuss at breakfast every day" (as cited in Keck, 2007, p. 6D).

Viewers of the show agree that program themes are relevant to their lives. According to two popular fan sites, fans do internalize the show plot lines. In the final episode of Season 1, Justin was redeployed to Iraq but the Army changed his return date. One fan "Suz" (2007) addressed her frustration on the fan site www.brothersandsisters-tv.com. "Crap! Justin's due at Fort Jackson (been there myself, actually.), on the 20th instead of the 22nd like they all thought. Arrggh! I wanted to smack the guy on the other end of the phone line." ABC also hosts an online fan site. In Season 2, Robert was well into his presidential bid and tried to secure an endorsement from his friend, the governor of Michigan. One viewer, "greentotes" (2008a), logged on to ABC's message boards and commented that show writers should have used a female character as the governor. "The writers of Brothers and [sic] Sisters should do a little more research. On the episode called "Compromises" original air date Feb. 17, 2008, they said the Govenor [sic] of Michigan is a male. It is in fact a woman...Jennifer Granholm." Other fans quickly rebutted that the show was fictional. Fan "watchingbas" (2008) commented that "And since they were basically portraying the governor as a political coward who was betraying a friend and giving in to a bully, I'd think they'd want to be particularly sure that no one mistook this for the real-life governor of Michigan." In response, "greentotes" (2008b) argued, "I realize the show is fictional, but everything else they said about Michigan (towns,events) [sic] were true. So if they are going

to go to all that trouble for the right names of towns and events going on then they could have at least had a female governor playing the character."

"greentotes's" response eloquently highlighted the essence of cultivation showing that *Brothers & Sisters* is indeed a dynamic program in broadcasting. It is a hybrid of fact and fiction and therefore could have potential implications for Gerbner's cultivation approach to the media. Traditional cultivation theory is grounded in two genres of broadcasting: fictional programming and news programming, which depicts reality. The main reason this study is important is because of the likelihood that cultivation results from this television drama. The cultivation resulting from *Brothers & Sisters*, however, is based on the merging of fact and fiction. According to the political, social, psychological, and emotional functions of television, viewers are likely to use television to learn about policy issues. Instead of gathering that information from news programming or documentaries, viewers observe a fictional family interact with the policies and agenda of a real president. Since little research has been done on political cultivation, the theoretical implications this program and others like it hold for cultivation theory have not been fully explored. This thesis seeks to do just that; to provide communication scholars with insight into the implications this political genre of programming has on traditional cultivation theory. The main implications to be examined will be level of involvement, the roles of resonance, and the effects of mainstreaming. To do that, the following research question was developed and explored through a two-fold research methodology consisting of a content analysis and focus groups.

RQ$_1$: What implications, if any at all, do television shows with abstract themes, like *Brothers & Sisters*, have on the traditional notions of cultivation?

To investigate the research question formulated above, testable hypotheses were generated. By conducting a cultivation analysis on the program, the findings from these hypotheses will either reaffirm the tenets of cultivation theory or highlight the potential challenges that cultivation scholars may soon face. The first hypothesis aimed to explore the highly nuanced themes of *Brothers & Sisters* to identify the program as one with the likelihood to result in the cultivation of its viewers.

H_1: *Brothers & Sisters* will be a program that is primed for cultivation to occur within its audience.

To continue with research trends, the second hypothesis was developed to demonstrate that there is a positive correlation between the level of exposure to a program and the level of cultivation resulting from that program. As noted above, scholars agree that there is a definite relationship between viewing habits and viewer perceptions. A similar trend is expected in the course of this study.

H_2: There will be a positive relationship between an audience member's level of political cultivation and level of exposure to *Brothers & Sisters*.

Because many of the themes of *Brothers & Sisters* revolve around political topics, it was expected that cultivation will occur because of those topics. To be better defined in the following sections, three specific political topics were used for the third hypothesis. The first was general political discourse. This included statements made about political parties in general and comments made about individual characters. Second, close attention was given to themes and discussions regarding a character's expression of military opinions. Third, civil rights, namely gay marriage, was scrutinized.

H₃: A cultivation gap between heavy and light viewers will be most pronounced in terms of political rhetoric, military opinions, and civil rights.

CHAPTER 5: METHODOLOGY

Content Analysis

To execute a study seeking to determine the presence of cultivation within the audience of *Brothers & Sisters* as well as focusing on the implications that modern television programming has on traditional notions of cultivation theory, a clear methodology was necessary. Gerbner et al. (1986) used a two-fold methodology when they first developed cultivation theory. First, a content analysis (message system analysis) of media messages was conducted on specific programming. Second, surveys (cultivation analysis) were administered to light and heavy television viewers. The content analysis allowed the researchers to accurately describe the presence of crime on television. The survey results were used to measure the cultivation differential. Gerbner found that those who consumed more television had a skewed perception of reality than light viewers. Morgan and Signorielli (1990), two colleagues of Gerbner's, expounded on the original cultivation methodology for researchers trying to find the heuristic value in cultivation studies. The findings of the content analysis, according to Morgan and Signorielli, should be used to formulate survey questions to measure any cultivation differential. It is important to ask participants about their television viewing habits while still being cautious in using self-report data. Although many of the results may seem modest, close attention should be paid to developing trends and themes between viewing groups and their perceptions of reality.

With these caveats in mind, a slightly different methodological approach was undertaken for this thesis. The first phase of data collection was a traditional content analysis of the first season of *Brothers & Sisters*. In essence, a content analysis is a thorough exploration of a certain text or group of texts in an attempt to draw out the messages, themes, values, and

communications within those texts. The first of 23 episodes in the first season aired September 24, 2006. The season finale aired May 20, 2007, before wrapping for a summer hiatus. The methodology of this *Brothers & Sisters* content analysis was constructed using Krippendorff's (1981) four components of content analysis: data making, data reduction, inference, and analysis. The chief methodological concerns of the content analysis fall under the data making and data reduction phases. Inference and analysis will follow in the findings section.

Data making was the data collection phase of the content analysis. This component was delineated into three steps: unitization, sampling, and recording. The unit of study in this content analysis was each episode of *Brothers & Sisters*. The researcher obtained the first season of the program on digital video disc for data collection. Each episode was viewed in chronological order to allow for consistent study of presented themes. Every episode was treated as a single unit of study and the media messages, themes and ideas were collected from each. In terms of sampling strategy, because the whole population of the first season was used, a sampling strategy was not necessary. The first season was used in this study for two reasons. First, there is a better sense of continuity in the themes of one season because of the summer hiatus. Cultivation, though it focuses on long-term outcomes, requires consistent and regular exposure to themes. Second, the Screen Writers Guild, the professional trade organization of all television writers (including the writers for *Brothers & Sisters*), undertook a strike that halted all television production. The strike stalled television programming schedules and brought doubt about the future of viewers' favorite television shows. Because this thesis was being completed during the strike, extreme caution was used when analyzing the results of this study. It was feared that the strike would excite feelings about this program that could skew the findings.

The recording step of data making could be considered the most important step in this phase. This step also goes hand-in-hand with the second component of data reduction in Krippendorff's (1980) content analysis methodology. A list of variables was generate before the viewing of each episode. These variables included expected themes and messages to be aired during each episode (see Appendix A). Variables included political discourse, military opinions, and thoughts on civil rights, namely gay rights. Close attention was also given to the use of statistics in conjunction with opinions. It was important to note which characters delivered such opinions and statistics. Furthermore, notice was given to the characters who were continually involved in certain policy issues and if they portrayed themselves as experts on the issue. To reduce this plethora of data into a manageable data set for analysis, a coding scheme was developed to record the data as it is collected. To create coder interreliability, four coders were trained to collect data from each episode. The four coders were graduate-level communication students from a large university who had previously conducted at least one content analysis for other courses.

When analyzing the content of each episode of *Brothers & Sisters*, it was imperative to develop a closely adhered to set of operationalized terms. Coders were asked to identify all positive and negative remarks made about Republicans and Democrats. Although some political scholars may have wished a broader political spectrum by applied to study political representation in this program, it was assumed that the writers and producers of the show would mainstream a complex political spectrum into semblances of the two main parties. Therefore, conservative and Republican labels were linked as were liberal and Democratic labels. Remarks that were coded came from any character, main, supporting or one-time appearing. Coders were also asked to identify positive and negative political remarks made about specific characters.

Any remark or phrase that linked the character to a party or ideology was coded as a remark about an individual. For instance, if Nora said, "You and all those other Republicans," to Kitty, the remark was coded as a comment toward Kitty and not Republicans in general. References about President George W. Bush and other political leaders were treated similarly. Coders identified opinions voiced in support of military action in the War on Terror (both Afghanistan and Iraqi theaters) and against military action. Only the comments made by main and regularly recurring characters were coded. To be a main character, the name of the character must have appeared in the opening show credits and have been a direct member of the Walker family. Recurring characters were considered any character that appeared in three episodes or more and had contributed dialogue in at least two scenes per episode. Opinions on gay marriage were treated similarly. The citation of statistics was used to help determine the character's authority over any given issue under examination.

Finally, coders investigated the economic issues presented in each episode. Because a large portion of the first season's plot revolved around the family business and trust funds, consideration of economic issues was strictly limited. Coders noted any dialogue about the state of the national and global economies, tax issues, and the family business solely within the context of the economy at large. To also establish a character's authority over economic issues, the citation of statistics and personal relevance were used. Economic rebuttals by characters directly resulting from discussions about the family business were also coded. Personal finances of the characters were not coded. The content analysis provided a foundation to examine the show factors that may lead to cultivation of the viewing audience.

Focus Groups

The second phase in data collection for this thesis allowed for a determination of cultivation that may be present in viewers of *Brothers & Sisters*. This stemmed from Gerbner's third prong of his cultivation research formula, cultivation analysis. Traditional cultivation analysis usually entails surveying a broad pool of viewers' perceptions of certain programming. Although most cultivation analyses use quantitative survey methodologies to measure a cultivation differential, this study used a qualitative approach because of its far-reaching ability to provide researchers with insight into why cultivation occurs. The previous literature is clear that some level of cultivation occurs for viewers of any given program.

A qualitative approach will be a fresh way of measuring cultivation and why it happens. Unlike quantitative data collection methods, qualitative methods allow for rich emergent data that can help to support original findings. It seems that, at least at this juncture in cultivation literature, qualitative methods are appropriate to study cultivation within the context of social constructionism. As Berg (2007) indicated about qualitative methods, "In the case of life-worlds, researchers focus on naturally emerging languages and the meanings individuals assign to experience" (p. 14). Furthermore, "certain elements of symbolism, meaning, or understanding usually require considerations of the individual's own perceptions and subjective apprehensions" (p. 14). In short, a qualitative approach will allow researchers the ability to find out why viewers experience cultivation by better exploring cultivation's own notions of resonance and the implications of mainstreaming.

The qualitative methodology used for this study was the focus group interview technique. Because this thesis concentrates on socially constructed realities stemming from cultivation, focus groups were the most practical approach. This is mostly because focus groups entail their

own development of a shared social reality. "Means and answers arising during focus group interviews are socially constructed rather than individually created" (Berg, 2007, p. 149). The findings from focus groups allow researchers to easily deconstruct a shared experience by a small group of individuals grappling with questions about how they constructed meaning both individually and within their community. In addition to the opportunity to examine emergent data, focus groups are also relatively more feasible than broadly distributed surveys in providing research flexibility.

The key to a successful focus group methodology is the recruitment of participants who will substantively contribute to the study under examination. After institutional review board approval was granted, a convenience sampling strategy for recruitment was used (see Appendix B). Participants were recruited from the adult population of two general education classes at a large university. The classes, a public speaking class and an introduction to communication class, were prime choices for recruitment because both are courses that either every student at that university is required to take and has a large enrollment to provide for the most random form of a convenience sample. This strategy generated a diverse participant pool. It was as random as possible because the researcher did not have previous knowledge regarding course rosters and because there was no mathematical way to determine the classifications and demographics of enrollees. Participants were recruited from more than 70 sections with each class population ranging from 20 to 60 students in the public speaking course and from 200 to 300 students in the introduction to communication course. Participants were also allowed to invite peers who met the eligibility requirements to participate with them. Course instructors were solicited to assist in recruitment efforts with the goal of having six to nine participants per focus group. To be eligible to participate, participants had to meet three criteria. First, participants had to be at least 18 years

of age. Second, participants had to consider themselves a semi-regular to regular viewer of the show, or at least be familiar with show plots and storylines. Finally, participants had to attend one of four pre-scheduled focus group meeting dates.

Each of four one-hour focus group sessions were held in a classroom on campus and was moderated by the researcher. The four sessions were scheduled at varying times to minimize scheduling conflicts and allow for the greatest amount of attendance. Every participant was required first to sign a consent form to participate (see Appendix C). Before each focus group began, it was necessary for the moderator to establish rapport with the participants to reduce apprehension about to their participation and create an environment of openness. To maintain the privacy of participants, it was suggested that each participant to select an alias identity to be used when reporting the findings. Although the focus groups required participants to share personal experiences and thoughts regarding the program, the focus groups were designed to expose participants to minimal psychological and emotional risk and no physical risk. For transcripts to be generated from each focus group session for data analysis, each session was tape recorded.

To maximize each focus group's contribution to this study, two important phases occurred during the group. First, each participant was asked to complete a voluntary simple demographic survey (see Appendix D). This instrument was reminiscent of a traditional cultivation analysis survey. Participants were asked to gauge their level of viewing and other demographic information for quantitative reporting in the findings. Second, the moderator prepared an interview guide in advance of the group meeting (see Appendix E). This allowed the researcher to keep the discussion on track while giving the focus group flexibility to explore insights and examples shared by participants.

The interview guide proposed questions related to viewers' perceptions of the program and characters. Discussion was geared toward the authority/expertise of characters and the intentions of the writers and producers. Participants were asked about their other viewing habits for various types of programming. The questions complied in the interview guide were developed from the research literature and were pretested on the four content analysis coders to maximize the contributions of the focus groups to the study.

As mentioned in the literature review, Dominick (1973) commented that mainstreaming uses the stereotypes of groups that have access to political power to prevent the stigmatizing of those who do not have political access, such as minorities. Focus group participants were asked to identify the stereotypes and characterizations inconsistent with stereotypes that were present in the program. Additionally, Hughes (1980), who was highly critical of Gerbner, discussed the use of control-type variables that could explain viewer alienation. Participants were asked to discuss their viewing habits and their use of recording equipment to watch *Brothers & Sisters* on their own time. Hughes also suggested that, contrary to Gerbner's theory, higher levels of exposure may in fact allow viewers to more accurately understand American culture. Questions were specifically designed to determine how levels of exposure affect cultural and political perceptions. Building upon the recommendations by Adoni and Mane (1984), questions were devised to explain the symbolic meanings that were assigned to the facts of the program. Participants were asked to consider, within the context of the program, assigning meaning to the characters' actions and statements. Particpants were then instructed to explain how those actions and statements resonate within the real world. Finally, using the model suggested by Hestroni and Tukachinsky (2006), participants were guided to relate the situations and responses of the Walker family to their own family life. The findings from the focus groups allowed the

researcher to determine two things: variance in the level of cultivation and reasons that

cultivation occurred or did not occur.

CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS

Content Analysis

After the content analysis portion of the data collection, *Brothers & Sisters* proved to be a television show that centered on politics and the direct impact political action has on individuals and families. According to Krippendorff's (1981) methodology, two steps are needed in analyzing the results to extrapolate a thorough content analysis. First, inferences were drawn from the analysis that allowed for characterizations and assessments to be made about individual characters within an established political dynamic. Krippendorff cautioned, "Inferences never yield absolute certainties. A content analyst should therefore assess as well as he [sic] can the probabilities with which available data can be said to lead to the inferences he [sic] intends to draw" (pp. 99-100). Using the frequency counts of statements verbalized by each character, political affiliations were successfully inferred to allow for a rich analysis of the program. Second, the findings developed from the inference process were then used to conduct a quantitative analysis of the data. The correlations and relationships of themes and messages portrayed in the show demonstrated that *Brothers & Sisters* is a program primed for the occurrence of cultivation within its audience.

It was anticipated that general political rhetoric, reactions to the War on Terror, opinions about gay marriage, and discussions relating to economics would serve as thematic guides for the show writers and producers. The predicted variables were found to be integral to the plot line of each episode. As such, each episode contained at least one politically charged comment or remark. The assumption that the show writers and producers would use mainstream versions of each political party was affirmed as conservative and Republican labels and terminology were used interchangeably. The same was true for liberal and Democratic labels and terminology. As

Table 1 describes, 48 comments about the two parties were made during the show's first season. Of those 48 comments, 32 (66.67%) spoke specifically of Republicans and 16 (33.33%) of Democrats. Of the 32 Republican comments, eight (25%) were positive in nature and 24 (75%) were negative. Of the 16 Democratic comments, five (31.25%) of those comments were positive and 11 (68.72%) were negative.

Table 1: Frequencies of Comments about Political Parties

	Party Affiliation		
Nature of Comment	**Republican**	**Democratic**	**Total**
Positive	8	5	13
Negative	24	11	35
Total	32	16	48

Within this content analysis, a conversation analysis was conducted between characters. The aim was to identify the positive and negative perceptions characters held for the political views of other characters. Table 2 displays the comments made regarding individual characters. A total of 84 comments were made with regard to a character's political affiliation. Of those comments, 67 ($\approx$ 80%) were about Republicans and 17 ($\approx$ 20%) were about Democrats. In terms of comments about Republicans, 22 (32.84%) were positive in nature and 45 (67.16%) were negative. Five (29.41%) comments about Democrats were positive and 12 (70.59%) were negative. Between general party comments and individual affiliation comments, 142 politically-charged comments were exchanged. Thirty (21.13%) positive comments and 69 (48.59%) negative comments were made about the Republican affiliation and ten (7.04%) positive comments and 33 (23.24%) negative comments were made about the Democratic affiliation.

Table 2: Frequencies of Comments about Individual Characters

Nature of Comment	Party Affiliation		Total
	Republican	Democratic	
Positive	22	5	27
Negative	45	12	57
Total	67	17	84

Because Justin, the youngest brother of the Walker family, served in military operations in Afghanistan, unique attention was paid to statements about the War on Terror. The content analysis revealed that the Walker family is decisively torn on the issue of the War on Terror. Comments were coded in either support or opposition of the war effort and if the comment was said before or after Justin's first deployment. Only six members of the Walker family made comments about the war. Four members, William, Kitty, Tommy, and Justin, demonstrated support of military action before Justin's deployment to Afghanistan. Although Kevin demonstrated opposition to the war only after Justin's deployment, Nora expressed negative comments both before and after Justin's deployment. Furthermore, Nora was the only character to verbalize her opposition to military action before Justin's first deployment. As Table 3 shows, Kitty still maintained her general support of the war even after Justin's deployment; however, she took a markedly different perspective in terms of Justin's personal involvement. She did not protest his involvement in the war but rather that the war still required his involvement. Aside from this change of views, the other members of the Walker family held true to their political ideologies. In all, 57 comments were made with regard to the War on Terror. Of those comments, 26 (45.61%) were positive, 30 (52.63%) were negative, and 1 (1.76%) was neutral.

Table 3: Frequencies of Comments about the War on Terror

Nature of Comments	Character																Total
	Before Justin's Deployment								After Justin's Deployment								
	William		Nora		Kitty		Tommy		Kevin		Justin		Warren		Robert		
Positive	3	1	0	1	4	5	3	0	0	0	3	4	0	1	0	1	26
Negative	0	0	5	6	0	10	0	0	0	3	0	2	0	3	0	1	30
Neutral	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total	3	1	5	7	4	16	3	0	0	3	3	6	0	4	0	2	57

Compared to perceptions of the War on Terror, the Walker family demonstrated a more tepid approach to the issue of gay marriage. Only 23 comments were shared with regard to same-sex unions. As shown in Table 4, of those 23 comments directly relating to gay marriage, 15 (65.22%) were in support of the issue and eight (34.78%) were opposed to the measure. Kevin, most likely because of his own homosexuality, was the most vocal character supporting gay marriage.

Table 4: Frequencies of Comments about Gay Marriage

Nature of Comments	Character							Total
	Nora	Sarah	Kitty	Paige	Kevin	Chad	Robert	
Positive	1	2	1	0	9	1	1	15
Negative	1	0	2	1	2	0	2	8
Neutral	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	2	2	3	1	11	1	3	23

Nine comments related to economic. Two themes were discussed: the family business and the economy at large. As mentioned before, economic discussions about the family business were strictly operationalized to include only those that discussed the family business within the economy at large. The storyline of early episodes in Season 1 revolved around embezzlement

and its impact on company finances. This does not necessarily add to the political dialogue of

economics. Two comments fit the operationalized definition. One was delivered by a consultant

to Sarah. It was established that the consultant had enough authority to deliver such a comment.

Sarah affirmed the comment. The other was delivered by Nora to Holly. It was established that

Nora did not have the authority to deliver the comment. No rebuttal was offered by Holly.

Dialogue about the economy at large was treated similarly. Nora delivered three comments about

economics and social justice to Jonathon, Kitty's boyfriend/fiancé at the beginning of the series.

Each time, Jonathon offered a rebuttal defending himself. It was established through

conversational analysis and his disclosed career as a hedge fund manager that Jonathon had the

authority to deliver such remarks and that Nora did not. Robert also delivered three remarks

about the status of the economy, and Kitty delivered two, one of which was in response to a

comment by Robert. Only one statistic was used when the economy was discussed and it was

delivered by Robert when discussing California's citrus crop.

Inferences can be drawn from the frequencies presented above. In terms of each

character, political categorization was possible based on the number of comments made and

received by each character. Table 5 shows the political alignment of each character. Most

characters self-categorized during the season. The frequency counts reaffirm their self-

categorization. Others, however, were not directly involved in the political discourse displayed.

To be labeled as conservative or liberal, a comment in relation to political party must have been

said by that character. Characters listed as unknown either did not make a substantive declaratory

or evaluating comment regarding a political party or affiliation or did not engage in at least one

political dialogue. The characters are not listed as moderate or uninvolved because viewers see

only segmented portions of family dialogue. Unseen conversations of a character could indicate affiliation.

Table 5: Political Affiliation of Each Character

Conservative	Liberal	Unknown
William	Nora	Joe
Kitty	Sarah	Justin
Robert	Warren	Gabe
Tommy	Kevin	Paige
Jason	Saul	Cooper
Jonathon	Amber	Julia
		Scotty
		Chad
		Tyler
		Rebecca
		Holly
		Jack

Another important inference can be made using the qualitative data collected during the content analysis. Resonance, as explained Chapter 2, is vital to the cultivation process by creating issue relevance to the viewer. In *Brothers & Sisters*, resonance was created by inserting real popular culture icons and an accurate timeline into the fictional lives of the Walker family. Although no direct references were made about President George W. Bush, two indirect references were made. The first was made in a conversation between Kitty and Robert while discussing a Bush policy initiative. Two comments were made during the conversation. The first was negative in nature and was made by Robert. Kitty rebutted in a positive nature. The second, also during a conversation between Kitty and Robert, occurred when Robert used the phrase "Bush league" to describe the status of his own presidential candidacy. Furthermore, other terms and phrases were used to establish that the show's story line was occurring during Bush's tenure.

The events of September 11, 2001, were used to establish a timeline guiding viewers to understand the key events of the Walker family plot line culminating in William's death in 2006. Direct references were made about Presidents Kennedy, Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Clinton.

To further the notion that *Brothers & Sisters* occurred in real time, many other important political references were made. Kitty mentioned the 2001 announcement from Vermont Senator Jim Jeffords when he cut his ties with the Republican Party and declared himself an Independent. Hillary Clinton was referenced as both First Lady and U.S. Senator. Comments were made to Kitty regarding the 2005 funeral of President Gerald Ford. Kitty, when discussing a potential blackmailer with Kevin, referenced the influence of veterans in politics to the criticism received by presidential hopeful John Kerry from veterans in 2004. Video footage from the War on Terror (Iraqi theater) and 9/11 were also included. Popular culture references were made about actress Julia Roberts, singer Justin Timberlake, the Staples Center, Martha Stewart's conviction, actress Demi Moore and the movie *Indecent Proposal*, singer Brittney Spears, the Web site Google, feminist Betty Friedan, television detective Colombo, television characters the Cheetah Girls, singer/actress Marilyn Monroe, actor George Clooney, CNN news anchor Wolf Blitzer, and the ABC show *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, among many others. In short, these many references indicated that the show was unfolding in real time and that the fictional Walker family exists in a non-fictional world.

A second prerequisite for cultivation is consistent themes and mainstream messaging. In other words, viewers need to be exposed to repetitive and predictable concepts. Cultivation is not likely to happen if viewers are presented with dissonance, unless it is resolved in accordance with viewer expectations. To examine apparent relationships developed in the show's themes,

the collected data from the content analysis was recoded treating each character as a unit of study. This is the second form of analysis suggested by Krippendorff (1981). Variables were coded to provide a quantitative tally of the comments made by the characters. Correlations were then conducted via SPSS to determine whether any relationship was present between the character affiliations and the comments characters made.

Several correlations were found when analyzing the relationships between character affiliation and statements. Using the affiliations derived from the inferences above, relationships were sought out between the number of statements made about political parties, personal affiliations, perceptions of the War on Terror, and opinions on gay marriage. The discussions about economics were not factored in because of the complexity of perspectives about economic systems. As Table 6 indicates, there were no statistical relationships between the affiliation of the character and the nature of comments made regarding the Republican Party. In other words, characters of either affiliation were equally as likely to make a positive or negative comment about the Republican Party. At the .05 alpha level, however, a relationship was noted between character affiliation and statements made about the Democratic Party. According to the coding scheme and data output, conservative characters were more likely to make positive and negative comments about the Democratic Party than were liberal characters. These findings indicate that the Republican Party was likely to be the recipient of critiques by all characters, but the Democratic Party was more likely to be critiqued by conservative characters. Liberal characters were less likely to talk about their own party.

Table 6: Correlation between Character Affiliation and General Political Statements

	Number of Positive Comments about Republicans	Number of Negative Comments about Republicans	Number of Positive Comments about Democrats	Number of Negative Comments about Democrats
Character Affiliation	-.360	-.289	-.412(*)	-.457(*)

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

A similar correlation test was conducted between character affiliation and the number of statements made in regard to the affiliation of individual characters. No statistically significant relationships, as seen in Table 7, were yielded among the variables. This indicates that all characters, regardless of their own affiliation, were equally as likely to express a feeling about another character's political views regardless of the character's political affiliation. To be clear, conservative and liberal characters were just as likely to discuss the personal affiliations of conservative and liberal characters. Interestingly, Table 8, a representation of the correlation between character affiliation and the number of comments received by each character, displays one significant statistical relationship (at the .01 alpha level). According to the table, conservative members of the Walker family were the most likely to receive a negative comment about a character's conservative affiliation. This does not mean that Republicans bore the brunt of familial criticisms. When the conversations were coded, attention was given to who said the comment, to whom the comment was said, the nature of the comment, and which party was being discussed. The coding scheme did not note if the person receiving the comment was the subject of the comment. This finding shows that if a negative comment about a conservative was said, it was more likely said to a conservative than a liberal.

Table 7: Correlation between Character Affiliation and Statements Said about Individual Affiliations

	Number of Positive Comments Said about a Character's Conservative Affiliation	Number of Negative Comments Said about a Character's Conservative Affiliation	Number of Positive Comments Said about a Character's Liberal Affiliation	Number of Negative Comments Said about a Character's Liberal Affiliation
Character Affiliation	-.296	-.168	-.222	-.358

Table 8: Correlation between Character Affiliation and Statements Received about Individual Affiliations

	Number of Positive Comments Received about a Character's Conservative Affiliation	Number of Negative Comments Received about a Character's Conservative Affiliation	Number of Positive Comments Received about a Character's Liberal Affiliation	Number of Negative Comments Received about a Character's Liberal Affiliation
Character Affiliation	-.315	-.508(**)	-.048	-.288

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

In terms of the War on Terror, only one notable relationship between affiliation and military opinions was revealed by the Pearson correlation operation. Character affiliation was directly tied to the positive comments made about the War on Terror before Justin's first deployment to Iraq, as demonstrated in Table 9. According to the coding scheme and data output, conservative members of the Walker family were more likely to express comments supporting

the War on Terror. Interestingly, a counterpart relationship is not prevalent in liberal members of

the Walker family. Comments opposing the war before Justin's first deployment were not related

to political affiliation. As the frequency count in Table 3 indicates, Kitty markedly changed her

perspective of the War on Terror after Justin's deployment. This could account for the

disappearance of any relationship between political affiliation and stance on the War on Terror

after Justin returned from his deployment. Much like what will be seen below, the lack of

relationship does not mean that inferences cannot be drawn about each character's stance on the

war. The lack of a statistical relationship between political affiliation and the War on Terror

leaves the audience to make the determinations on their own, resulting in cultivation.

Table 9: Correlation between Character Affiliation and the War on Terror

	Number of Positive Comments about War on Terror Before Justin's First Deployment	Number of Negative Comments about War on Terror Before Justin's First Deployment	Number of Positive Comments about War on Terror After Justin's First Deployment	Number of Negative Comments about War on Terror After Justin's First Deployment
Character Affiliation	-.428(*)	-.069	-.260	-.335

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Traditionally labeled as a volatile political issue, gay marriage was portrayed as the most

mainstream issue discussed in *Brothers & Sisters*. In a stereotypical sense, gay marriage is

supported by liberals and opposed by conservatives. It was assumed that the show would portray

the issue similarly. The Pearson correlation test in Table 10, however, showed that *Brothers &*

Sisters did not perpetuate the stereotypes of mainstream politics. There was no statistical

relationship between party affiliation and views on same-sex marriage. Although the frequency

counts above argue that comments were made in support of and opposed to gay marriage, the

relationship between party affiliation and opinions could not be established. This does not

necessarily mean that inferences cannot be drawn to predict how a certain character would vote

on such an issue. It merely demonstrates that the show did not verbalize a distinct stance on the

issue of gay marriage. By not doing so, the writers and producers of *Brothers & Sisters* allowed

audience members to develop their own assumptions about the show's view on the issue. In other

words, viewers were left to "think what they want to think."

Table 10: Correlation between Character Affiliation and Gay Marriage Opinions

	Number of Comments in Support of Gay Marriage	Number of Comments Opposed to Gay Marriage
Character Affiliation	-.147	-.375

The above analysis highlights the thematic relationships demonstrated in the first season

of *Brothers & Sisters*. In terms of frequency counts, characters can be identified with specific

political affiliations. Correlations, however, could not be determined among political affiliation

and political rhetoric, military opinions, and views on gay marriage. The lack of statistically

significant relationships between political affiliations and statements made by the characters

indicates that the policy representations were indeed mainstream, most likely to reduce audience

alienation and present the show in a non-bias fashion. This provided the opportunity for viewers

to interpret the show using their own views and experiences, resulting in cultivation. To

determine, however, whether cultivation has actually occurred within the *Brothers & Sisters* audience, a series of focus group discussions were conducted. The findings, detailed in the next section, allow for a qualitative analysis measuring the extent of cultivation within show viewers.

Focus Groups

Because this study seeks to examine the presence of cultivation in the audience of *Brothers & Sisters*, focus groups were conducted to realize the varying levels of political cultivation as well as understand the factors needed for the cultivation process. Demographic data was collected from the survey administered at the start of each focus group and focus group transcripts were analyzed using conversational cues as theme guides. As a result of recruitment efforts through two general education courses at a large university, 22 respondents participated in one of four focus groups. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 30, and the average age of participants was 21.44. Eight freshmen, four sophomores, three juniors, three seniors, and four graduate-level students participated. According to self-reported exposure to the program, ten participants had light exposure, four had moderate exposure, and eight had heavy exposure. Only two participants, both identified as heavy viewers, indicated that *Brothers & Sisters* was their favorite television show currently airing. Although one focus group comprised only two participants, both had similar exposure to the program and collaboratively discussed their exposure to the show. The largest session included ten participants. In two separate groups, two participants used the same alias, "Sarah." To prevent confusion while reporting the findings, the second use of the alias was changed to "Samantha." Through the use of conversation analysis of the focus group transcripts, themes were gleaned that provided evidence of political cultivation of participants and the factors leading to such cultivation.

Although detailed surveys are generally used to conduct a cultivation analysis, each focus group provided deep insights into the cultivation process and rich emergent data regarding the implications that cultivation scholars may face as television evolves. The goal of each focus group was to develop a socially constructed reality among group members to better understand their individual and group perceptions of the political representations contained within the show. As a result of focus group discussions, the findings of the content analysis were reinforced. The program was found to be realistic, relatable, and mainstream. Through group discussions, it was determined that involvement is necessary for cultivation.

Many of the focus group participants agreed that *Brothers & Sisters* was realistic in its political representations. Participants of each session were asked to identify dramatic plot lines of the program. Similar situations were noted by each group. These included Justin's first and second deployment, Justin's drug addiction, William's infidelity to Nora, Joe and Sarah's divorce, Kevin's "coming-out" experience, and Kitty's workplace romantic relationships. When asked whether participants had experienced one of those issues, or another unreported issue in the storyline, in their own life, all participants indicated that their family had encountered a similar issue. No participant, however, indicated that their family had encountered every issue that confronted the Walker family. One group participant, Dave (light, 20), noted, "That stuff still happens, just not that dramatic." In another session, a group conversation between heavy and light viewers duly noted the discrepancy:

> *Moderator:* The show often discusses or depicts political arguments, drug use, fidelity, and divorce. Do you think these are major issues in the real world?
>
> *Multiple voices:* Yeah.
>
> *Moderator:* Do you think the average family experiences all of them?

Jane (heavy, 19): I think every family can somehow relate to a couple of them.

Samantha (light, 18): I think one or two issues each family can identify with. I think they [the producers] kind of try to shove all the issues into one family, which is fine.

Jane: Well, it is TV. [Laughter].

Regina (heavy, 23): Maybe your family itself hasn't dealt with divorce, but maybe your aunt has been divorced. Or your cousin's husband cheated or something like that. You'll have some sort of connection to it.

A common trend emerged when discussing the realism of the show. Some participants concurred that although the plot lines of the show were realistic, the depiction of plots within the program was not. As noted in Jane's comment above, many participants suggested the plot developments were sensationalized for television. Each focus group concurred that although some aspects of the program were made for television broadcast, the show is more realistic than the connotation of a soap opera, but less realistic than their own families' stories.

Regardless of any perceived notions of sensationalized stories, most focus group participants were able to relate with key characters. Most participants identified with a character for three main reasons. For some light viewers of *Brothers & Sisters*, character identification was because of the actor who played the character. For instance, Phil (light, 24), noted that he could not name a character with whom he could identify but said, "I couldn't really decide, but I guess the girl who plays Kitty. I like her acting." Similarly, Jack (light, 20) said: "I like the guy played by Rob Lowe. I liked him in *The West Wing*." Several light, moderate, and heavy viewers identified with specific characters because of shared traits or beliefs between the character and participant. Michael (light, 18) noted he "picked Robert because he could balance his work and family life, which is basically like all of us eventually want to do and he really portrayed that really well." Similarly, Tina (moderate, 23) said that "I like him [Justin] from a personal

standpoint, having a brother who went off to Iraq." Heavy viewer Jane (19) held that she "liked

Kitty. Number one, I guess because she's a conservative and so am I." Moderate to heavy

viewers identified with the character's place and development within the story. Mary (moderate,

30) indicated that she identified with Justin "because he's struggling to find his way. It seems

like everybody else in the family has found their way and they're way and they're following their

path." Likewise, Keith (heavy, 24) said he identified with Justin because "he goes through a lot

of tough times and it's pretty cool to see a character evolve like that." These findings indicate

that the level of exposure to the program provides insight into how viewers may identify with a

character. In other words, lighter viewers tend to identify with a character based on peripheral

reasons while heavier viewers tend to identify with a character based on thematic reasons.

In addition to recognizing identifiable characteristics, focus group participants were led to

discuss identifiable real-life events in the show that could create resonance for viewers. More

than five years after September 11, 2001, several participants discussed their perceptions of the

show's references to 9/11. Regina (heavy, 23) discussed how the show's portrayal of 9/11

reminded her of her feelings of patriotism. The show's dialogue and visual representation of 9/11

"was really, really powerful. I think from my opinion, I was feeling very patriotic after 9/11 and

it reciprocated a lot of the feelings that I had immediately after the event." Another real-life

event displayed in the program was Robert's presidential campaign. One participant, Michael

(light, 18), commented that Robert's story line "definitely goes right along with what's going on

now in politics." Charlotte (heavy, 24) agreed:

> I think I draw more from this real life situation, especially with the political
> campaigning, and so I think I correlate what I learned about the news in our
> political campaign to what would be going on in theirs. I know they just had the
> Michigan primary last week and I'm like, 'Oh, they won the Michigan' and 'Oh,
> and the primary's going on here.'

When each focus group was guided to discuss the mainstream components of the program, two themes were highlighted. The first theme highlighted *Brothers & Sisters'* use of mainstream political rhetoric. The second was the show's representation of fairness within the characters' political rhetoric. Each focus group was instructed to distinguish between mainstream representations and stereotypes. Participants did not perceive that a full political spectrum was represented, just philosophies of the two major U.S. political parties.

Participants, however, indicated that people cannot necessarily be categorized as such. Tina (moderate, 23) posited, "I feel like we're using Republican and conservative synonymously; and liberal and Democrat synonymously, and I don't think that's always necessarily the case." In the same focus group, Samantha (light, 18) noticed a similar trend in the one episode she viewed. "I feel like numerous people, not most people, but a lot of people are moderate. Like I said, I've only seen the show once but I haven't seen like a moderate person on there. Someone who's kind of in the middle." Mary (moderate, 30), in a different session, agreed. "I think it may represent something, but I think primarily for viewership sake the majority of the people are conservative or liberal, or Democrat or Republican. So I think it's trying to catch as many as they can. But it doesn't exclude."

The "exclusion" mentioned by Mary referred to the alienation viewers may experience when non-mainstream representations are made within a television program. In conversations about this notion, noticeable differences were found between light and heavy viewers in their perceptions of mainstream political representations. Moderate viewer Mary (30) furthered:

> I don't feel like they really use any political-entity specifics. They start on, but they don't actually touch on the issues. They say things like, 'Oh, you're so liberal,' 'Oh, you're so conservative,' as opposed to very few of the arguments that are fleshed out to the point where 'I believe this…,' 'I'm conservative because I believe this…,' and 'I'm not because I believe this...'

The variance between light and heavy viewers highlighted by Mary was further evidenced in a separate focus group when participants were asked to discuss their perceptions of *Brothers & Sisters'* presidential hopeful Robert McCallister:

> *Moderator:* Have all of you seen Senator McCallister in an episode?
>
> *All:* Yes.
>
> *Moderator:* Is he someone you would at least consider voting for? If he were in real life running for President against John McCain, Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and all those? Is he someone you would consider voting for? You don't have to say you would vote yes or no for him, but would you at least think about voting for him.
>
> *Multiple voices:* Yes.
>
> *Jane (heavy, 19):* With the candidates now? Yes.
>
> *Moderator:* Anyone who wouldn't?
>
> *Jay (light, 27):* I wouldn't.
>
> *Moderator:* Any particular reason.
>
> *Jay:* Against the people who are running now?
>
> *Moderator:* If he were to run for president any time. If he ran in the last election, two elections from now…
>
> *Jay:* No.
>
> *Phil (light, 24):* He's just like a typical politician.
>
> *Moderator:* That's my next question. Does he represent the typical politician?
>
> *Multiple voices:* Yeah.
>
> *Jay:* Full of crap, yeah. [Laughter].
>
> *Regina (heavy, 23):* I would consider him, but I wouldn't vote for him. I agree with many of his views, because he does express a lot on the show, but I would not agree with all of them.
>
> *Moderator:* What in his platform do you like?

Regina: I'm very socially liberal, so I disagree with everything on that end, but I'm very conservative when it comes down to fiscal matters and so –

Tina (moderate, 23): What is his political platform? I'm curious because I don't know enough about it.

Regina: He's pretty conservative.

Moderator: Do you know tenets of his platform?

Regina: Well, let's see. He's pro-choice, for the war against terror. Pro-life, sorry. Pro-life. He is fiscally conservative with regard to tax cuts. And he believes strongly in –

Tina: He's your textbook Republican.

Regina: Yeah. The other thing I was thinking of that he always talked about was his platforms for business and, I was trying to think of that one episode where he was talking about tax reform with the corporations.

Tina: Does he have any innovative ideas?

Regina: It's a television show. [Laughter].

Moderator: What role does his party label play in how you look at him as a candidate? Or does it play a role? Do you discard him because he's a Republican? Or do you consider him because he's a Republican?

Regina: I'd have to say I go more on the issues so it doesn't matter what his label is, and I agree with him on some things and I like his learning style and I like the way he presents himself, but I disagree with the other things that I don't think label has much to do with it.

Jane: I think he's open. I like him. I guess it's just his character, like he seems really open to other people's ideas. He's not like an extreme, crazy, conservative, like, wacky person.

In addition to the mainstream representations of political rhetoric, focus group participants also discussed the fairness of represented views within the program. The questions related to this were developed from the findings of the content analysis. It was determined in those findings the show did not preference one party over another in terms of political

representations but the political affiliation of certain characters could be inferred from their statements. Focus groups were asked whether there was a bias present within the conversations of the characters. All four focus groups explored the notion of bias with markedly different perceptions between the four groups as well as light and heavy viewers of each group:

Focus Group 1:

Moderator: Do you think on all of the policy issues that this show represents – war, gay marriage, economics – do you think the show represents all of the views equally? Or do you think that it dogs one party over another? Do you think that they're unfairly represented?

Hank (light, 19): Of course, it's going to depend on the episode, but I think overall, if you look at the whole series, if you actually sat down and balanced it, I think it would pretty much balance out. That would depend on what's going on, what story they want to run with, but they try to address everything equally.

Sarah (heavy, 19): I agree.

Moderator: You agree?

Charlotte (heavy, 24): I think that when they do, I think it's like the political viewpoint, there's always someone there on the other side. You're still keying that other angle. Yeah, I think it's pretty fairly representative.

Focus Group 2:

Moderator: From what you've said, do you think it doesn't go after one party over another, it doesn't say this party's always wrong and this party's always right. You'd say that they're pretty fairly balanced?

Dave (light, 20): Considering I haven't really seen too much of the show, I don't think the main focus of the show is politics. I mean to criticize one party or another.

Mary (moderate, 30): I agree. I think that's just another conflict in the show.

Moderator: It's just another facet of the show?

Mary: Yeah, just another conflict to rub the people against each other, which I think is interesting in itself. You don't usually find a family that has such diverse political views.

Focus Group 3:

Moderator: … Do you think it represented everyone fairly, or do you think there was one party that was singled out?

George (light, 18): … As far as the parties are run, like you were saying earlier with the behind the scenes thing, that's how I imagine it would be run. I don't think if favored a certain one over another. I couldn't tell that it did.

Michael (light, 18): It was really only showing McCallister's point of view throughout most of the episode that we saw.

Moderator: So you're saying Democrats weren't represented, or even other Republicans, because they were just focusing on one person.

Michael: They mention other parties just briefly, but they didn't really go into detail about any of them, so I think the majority of it was just Republicans.

George: It wasn't like they were throwing out ideas that are strictly Republican or strictly Democrat. They're really just like, 'Okay, we've got to win the state, let's go toward that.' It was pretty much the whole episode.

Focus Group 4:

Jack (light, 20): More of the characters are more towards the liberal side, and it does seem to take more of a liberal slant to me. It's kind of like she's [Kitty] the only one that's conservative out of the whole group, and they kind of knock her for it here and there. It kind of seems to try to represent that most people are liberal and there are a couple of conservatives here and there, but that's not the case.

Jane (heavy, 19): I feel like they play the whole show like against her and they make her -- like Hollywood is pretty liberal, and I think they try to play the rest of the family against Kitty.

Samantha (light, 18): I agree. It's like they put a conservative character in there but it's like she's usually wrong, or they portray her as being wrong about a lot of things or whatever.

Regina (heavy, 23): I'm going to kind of disagree with you all. If you think about it, Kitty McCallister, Tommy, the father whose name I've forgotten --

Moderator: William.

Regina: William, against Kitty or against Nora, Sarah, and Sarah has really conservative business outlooks. And the other really liberal one is Kevin, so it's actually like four to four. It's pretty evenly ratched out. And I'll give you that McCallister wasn't a character until the second season, or until the very end of first season and then mostly in second season. So it was a little outnumbered, but -

Keith: -- and there was Warren, the co-host of the show. He represented the blue chair in the show. So he was the liberal.

Regina: So I'd like to give it a bit more balance than that.

The differences in perceptions exhibited in these excerpts indicate that cultivation occurs through the use of broad mainstream and resonating messages that appeal to a diverse audience. Although light and heavy viewers expressed similar concerns about the show's representation of fairness, the variance is likely to correspond to a viewer's particular level of involvement in the program. In other words, the use of mainstreaming and resonance may not affect a viewer's level of cultivation if the viewer is not involved in the program. At the beginning of each session, surveys were administered to each participant. One question asked participants to identify the other activities they undertook while they viewed the program. Seven participants indicated they devoted the entire hour of the broadcast schedule to watch the program. Of those seven, two were heavy viewers and one was a moderate viewer. The remaining participants provided multiple activities that they normally undertook while watching. Seven participants indicated that they did homework while they watched. Nine indicated that they talked with friends or family while the show was airing. Eight said they surfed the Internet or checked email while watching.

One participant said he exercised during the show, one cooked dinner, two did laundry, one paid bills, and one played with a pet. Three heavy viewers and one moderate viewer said that they regularly recorded the show or had the show digitally recorded. One said he watched the show at the ABC Web site. As evident by this breakdown, viewers vary in their degree of involvement with *Brothers & Sisters*.

To further explore this, comments from each focus group were extracted to provide an indication of participants' involvement. Taken from different focus group transcripts, light, moderate, and heavy viewers expressed consistent indicators of involvement with the program itself. Light viewers indicated that they undertook different tasks during the show. Moderate viewers pointed out the show's emotional appeals leading to their involvement. Heavy viewers expressed their desire to watch every episode, a desire sometimes reminiscent of addiction.

> *Hank (light, 19):* I'm actually doing a few other things on my computer or talking with friends, so I hear that he's talking about an issue but I'm not really listening like I do when the actual candidates speak, because it has no real direct effect on me.

> *Mary (moderate, 30):* It makes me cry every episode.

> *Regina (heavy, 23):* I thought that [Kitty's monologue about the change in her perception of the war] was a really powerful moment in the show. That's when I got hooked actually.

Involvement with the show is not limited to an inclination to watch the program. Involvement can also be evaluated based on the content of the program. For instance, some viewers may be more involved with political issues while other viewers may be more concerned about family issues. The focus groups allowed for some determination as to the participants level of political involvement.

> *George (light, 18):* I'm not very politically involved. I watch it and stuff, but I'm not a political activist.

Sarah (heavy, 19): I don't really pay attention to what he [Robert] says on the show, his political views. It's all the drama around it.

Tina (moderate, 23): Most of my exposure to the show has been in bits and pieces because my roommate DVRs it and I'll watch it a little bit here and there. I'm not one to DVR and sit down and watch a whole episode a week for myself. But dealing with the young son going off to war and the drug addiction and how the father died, and the one gay brother and then Calista Flockhart's character, the political aspects, which is conservative. There are so many dynamic issues there that play into it.

Some moderate and heavy viewers, although not speaking directly to their level of involvement were more likely to develop thoughts and conversations about how they think about the political representations within the program. These thought processes are indicative of high issue involvement.

Regina (heavy, 23): Like, you both respect Kitty a lot for her conservative views, but she can also step back. I'm thinking about one episode in particular, I don't know if anyone saw it, but the one where she tried to get Senator McCallister to help her get Justin from going back to the war. She ended up going on air before broadcasting that interview and saying I've compromised the integrity of this interview because of the fact that I asked him if my brother wouldn't go I wouldn't ask about his divorce. She bashed the war in that speech. And for being a staunch conservative who had supported the war hands down up to that point, it was like, 'Whoa, this is really realistic, this is something we can really grab onto.' She's not this overbearing conservative. She's realistic. She's taking a moment and going, 'Okay, let me think about this again.'

Jessie (heavy, 24): It's like a very sad truth. Like, the fact that 50 percent of all marriages end in divorce, we're representing that through the divorce. The fact that when Kevin was talking about how he came out of the closet, how they kind of black-sheeped him for a while and then especially his father really outcasted him for a bit, and that was really rough. That seems pretty reflective of today's opinions about sexuality and whether or not, I mean, you could be accepting, but I think that's pretty reflective. It's a sad truth that some of the problems they have are so similar to what we see in American families. It is pretty reflective, I think.

Mary (moderate, 30): I think it's helped me identify some of the backlash of the war, because I don't think we, when we as a country sent soldiers over to fight we didn't consider what's going to happen when they get back, how is their family reacting, or their decision-making process to go to war. So I personally have

found that fascinating, the whole conflict between the mother and the daughter and brother. The mother blaming the daughter for sending the brother to war and messing him up.

The variances demonstrated by these excerpts allow for researchers to detect any cultivation that may have occurred as a result of viewing *Brothers & Sisters*. Explored more fully in the hypotheses discussions below, it will be noted that exposure, as theorized by Gerbner and his colleagues (1986), is not the main viewing factor that causes cultivation. Rather, discussion will place greater importance on the role of involvement as it combines with the show's realism, resonance and mainstream political representations.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION

Hypothesis 1

H$_1$: *Brothers & Sisters* will be a program that is primed for cultivation to occur within its

audience.

According to the content analysis and focus group discussions, strong support was found

for H$_1$. *Brothers & Sisters* is indeed a television program that has great potential for the

cultivation of its audience. Support for this finding can be attributed to the use of real life events,

real life themes, and viewer predictability. The use actual events and themes generate resonance

for viewers and the use of mainstreaming assists viewers in meeting their desired expectations.

Dominick (1973) contended that the potential for cultivation was most pronounced when

a "reflective theory of television broadcasting" could be determined (p. 241). In other words,

researchers can determine the potential for cultivation if the television program contains themes

or "characteristics actually present in society" (p. 241). As established through the content

analysis, *Brothers & Sisters* does just that. As noted above, the program frequently refers to real

popular culture and political icons. Also, real events, such as the 9/11 attacks, are not only used

to create a real-time timeline but also serve as milestones in the show's plot. For instance, Justin's

desire to enlist in the military was spurred because of the 9/11 attacks. In the second season,

while Robert's presidential bid was in full swing, the Michigan primary depicted in the show

aired February 17, 2008, just one month after the real Michigan primary held on January 15,

2008. The air date of this episode may have even been delayed due to the stop in show

production caused by the Screen Writers Guild strike. Furthermore, Robert's presidential bid is

happening during the 2008 presidential election campaign. The presence of real life events alone

does not create the possibility for cultivation; the use of real life themes is also important.

According to Morgan and Signorielli (1990), "The world of television shows and tells us about life: people, places, striving, power, and fate" (p. 14). The content of *Brothers & Sisters* mirrors many of the same processes, responses, and states its viewers encounter or are familiar with. As the focus groups reaffirmed, show themes are reminiscent of real life. The balancing of work life and family life, divorce, infidelity, new job ventures, and drug use are modern problems facing many American families. Although viewers may not be able to identify with every problem the Walker family encounters, viewers may be confronted with at least one of those issues in real life. This aspect of audience identification speaks to the heart of cultivation theory. As Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1986) stated, "The point is that cultivation is not conceived as the unidirectional process but rather more like a gravitational process. The angle and direction of the 'pull' depends on where groups of viewers and their styles of life are in reference to the center of gravity, the 'mainstream' of the world of television. Each group may strain in a different direction, but all groups are affected by the same central current" (p. 24). To be considered mainstream, the show has not only narrowly focused the content but also has created many, often overlapping, characterizations to allow for audience identification. This has resulted in the potential for cultivation around many different themes.

Gerbner et al. (1986) noted that "Television viewing is both a shaper and a stable part of certain life styles and outlooks. It links the individual to a larger if synthetic world, a world of television's own making" (p. 23). In other words, television creates perceptions and maintains perceptions. This seemingly oxymoronic statement is a direct result of mainstreaming. Through long-term exposure and noticeable patterns, viewers can identify specific character traits and expected actions. Hawkins and Pingree (1990) posited, "The messages that lead to cultivation are aggregate *patterns* of action and characterization across many programs of every season of

entertainment television" (p. 37). Viewers do not experience dissonance if the characters they view act in accordance with viewer expectations. Mainstreaming is used to satisfy the expectations of a diverse audience comprising millions of viewers within one single program with a finite set of characters. Furthermore, mainstreaming requires the use of predictability. Viewers need to know that the characters will satisfy their expectations. Sometimes clouded by situational drama, episode resolutions must bring viewer expectations full circle. In that respect, *Brothers & Sisters* is mainstream in its political representations. The lack of statistically significant relationships between political affiliation and political views reinforces this notion. Although characters have been developed politically and viewers can identify respective political affiliations, the show has a whole has little political affiliation. The use of resonance and mainstreaming creates the capacity for the program to cater to and satisfy a diverse audience, potentially resulting in cultivation, supporting H_1.

<div align="center">Hypothesis 2</div>

H_2: There will be a positive relationship between an audience member's level of political cultivation and level of exposure to *Brothers & Sisters*.

Using Morgan and Signorielli's (1990) traditional notion of cultivation, the themes developed during the focus group discussions insist that there is general support found for H_2. "The goal of cultivation analysis is to determine whether differences in the attitudes, beliefs, and actions of light and heavy viewers reflect differences in their viewing patterns and habits, independent of (or in interaction with) the social, cultural, and personal factors that differentiate light and heavy viewers" (p. 17). Heavier viewers of *Brothers & Sisters* were more likely to

demonstrate a higher level of cultivation than lighter viewers. Using models from other scholars, however, the results presented below maybe less conclusive.

The early exploration of political cultivation by Gerbner et al. (1984) found that heavy television viewers were likely to self-report a "moderate" political perspective because of television's mainstream content. As Gerbner et al. suggested, cultivation in a political context does not necessarily mean that a viewer has a wrong or outlandish perception. When measuring the level of political cultivation, emphasis is placed on the outcomes of mainstreaming efforts. In general, this study found similar identifiable differences in self-reported political perspectives between light, moderate, and heavy viewers. Lighter viewers of the program were likely to identify with a particular party affiliation whereas heavier viewers were likely to identify with issues representative of both major parties. Although participants were never directly asked to disclose their political affiliations, many volunteered information willingly in the course of conversation. Following Gerbner et al.'s model, this repeated phenomenon indicates heavier viewers do demonstrate a higher level of cultivation than lighter viewers.

Gerbner et al.'s account of political cultivation, however, only explored the impact that exposure to content has on a viewer's perceptions. As noted by Potter (1993), Shrum and O'Guinn (1993), Shrum (1995), and Cohen and Weiman (2000), little theoretical attention was given a viewer's level of involvement with aired content. This thesis found that viewers with high involvement of the show's political representations, regardless of exposure levels, were more likely to exhibit a moderate approach to their own political affiliations, results indicative of cultivation. This idea is clearly represented in the focus group when participants were asked whether they would consider voting for Robert McCallister for president. According to the content analysis and focus group perceptions, Robert, although Republican, was designed to be a

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mainstream version of a presidential candidate with broad appeal. Participants with light/moderate exposure and low involvement and participants with heavy exposure and low involvement indicated that they would not consider voting for Robert if he were a candidate running in real-life. Participants with light/moderate exposure and high involvement and participants with heavy exposure and high involvement indicated that they would consider voting for Robert in a real-life election. This was explained in further discussion when light involvement viewers commented that his character was "too stereotypical," whereas high involvement viewers commented that his character was representative, but "not cliché." Robert's political affiliation did not play a role in the participants' consideration of him as a real-life candidate.

Although it would be expeditious to accept the support of H_2 from this analysis, further examination of the hypothesis is necessary. Potter (1993) has suggested four conditions researchers must achieve to accept the causal relationships suggested by cultivation theory. First, viewers must be exposed to a message before the perception can be formed. According to the discussions of the focus groups, many of the high involved and heavy exposed viewers demonstrated that the messages in *Brothers & Sisters* spurred them to consider and reconsider their held notions about political themes, satisfying the first requirement. Second, there must be an identifiable relationship between exposure and the development of the perception. In this study, the relationship exists as low involvement and light exposed viewers did not exhibit any changes in their perceptions held prior to their exposure. Third, researchers must demonstrate that there are no third-party variables, such as previous political experiences, news broadcasts, and political readings, that may influence the development of the perception. Because no comprehensive inventory was taken for each participant, it is impossible for this researcher to

argue that no third-party variables exist in viewers that could affect the development of their perceptions based on their viewing of *Brothers & Sisters*. Finally, the developed perception must be akin to the "television world" (p. 585). Finding that participants who have higher levels of exposure and involvement were more likely to call themselves "moderate" indicates that their perceptions are akin to those presented in the television show.

Although the presence of third-party variables cannot be defended, the power of the findings is not negated. When exploring the argument "that all individuals rely at least partially on fictional portrayals of political events and actors in the construction of their perceptions of political realities," Holbrook and Hill (2005) deduced that the "distinctions between sources of entertainment and sources of information are relatively unimportant when it comes to the formulation of political attitudes" (pp. 291-292). Empirical evidence suggests that outside variables will always be present and cannot be avoided when conducting cultivation research. Based on that research assumption and the findings, H_2 is cautiously supported.

<div align="center">Hypothesis 3</div>

H_3: A cultivation gap between heavy and light viewers will be most pronounced in terms of political rhetoric, military opinions and civil rights.

The findings of this study provide partial support for H_3. Indications of cultivation were present in only two of the three themes studied in the content analysis above. While participants with moderate/heavy exposure and high involvement with *Brothers & Sisters* demonstrated heightened levels of cultivation in political rhetoric and military representations, there was little evidence of cultivation in representations of civil rights, namely gay marriage.

In general, there were noticeable examples of cultivation resulting from the program. For instance, although the use of statistics and attribution were rare in character dialogue, focus group participants believed that the characters were sources of authority on the policy issues they represented. Age and occupation were the indicators of authority and credibility perceived by the focus group participants. Similarly, authority and credibility were gauged by reactions to situations that participants had themselves experienced. Light exposure and low involvement participants were more likely to mention the character situations and statements that detracted from their credibility, whereas heavy exposure and high involvement used the same situations to identify with the character.

In the theme of political rhetoric, all participants used Robert's fictional presidential campaign as a point of reference as to how a real-life campaign would operate. Participants who had lower involvement were likely to identify political stereotypes and evaluate them on the merits of the stereotypes and not of the message. Participants who were more involved with the program were more likely to bypass the political stereotypes, such as rank-and-file party membership, depicted within the program and to evaluate the messages within the framework of their previously held perceptions. By thinking outside the stereotypes, high involvement participants were able to exercise Shrum's (1997) heuristic processing model. This model of cultivation rests on "the assumption that the accessible television information that is recalled in an effort to construct a cultivation-type judgment will be considered relevant and thus used (rather than discounted) in judgment construction" (p. 350). In other words, the opportunity existed for high involvement viewers to expound on the messages shared within *Brothers & Sisters*.

The show's representation of the current U.S. military situation resulted in the largest amount of definable cultivation among viewers at all levels of exposure and moderate to high levels of involvement. This is most likely because of the prevalence of this theme throughout the entire plot and at the heart of the show's premise. Much of the military plot line is highly emotional, which is likely to motivate thought, reflection, and contemplation by viewers. Furthermore, the congruence between the fictional television program and the reality of war seamlessly merges fact and fiction. As Shapiro and Lang (1991) noted, "Television's influence on social reality is probably the result of a complex set of physiological and psychological processes. One possibility is that a person gathers information from all sources (including television), and then he or she makes decisions about the relevance... or informativeness... of that information when constructing social reality." High involvement participants perfectly demonstrated the dialectical process described by Shapiro and Lang. Many high involvement participants at all levels of exposure reflected on the non-fiction aspects of the war and related those thoughts to the context presented in *Brothers & Sisters* to determine their own views on the War on Terror, thus exemplifying the cultivation process.

Unlike *Brothers & Sisters* military representations, cultivation was not identifiable in the vein of civil rights, chiefly the issue of gay marriage. Although the theme was identified as a thread in the plot line during the content analysis, it did not play a major role in the premise of Season 1. The only participants to discuss the role of the gay marriage theme were light exposure and low involvement participants. In addition, the participants who discussed the theme exhibited no attitude change toward gay marriage or homosexuality. The lack of identifiable cultivation on this theme does not mean that cultivation did not happen and suggests further research is needed. Sexual orientation is a sensitive topic, especially to be discussed in a group

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setting. This limitation may not have allowed for a full exploration of attitude change regarding gay marriage. Therefore, this portion of the H_3 cannot be supported.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This thesis was intended to serve as a pilot study to test the application of cultivation theory. The limitations of this study provide many opportunities for future scholars. The chief limitation of this is thesis centers on *Brothers & Sisters'* presence in living rooms via the television. Hawkins and Pingree (1990) stated that "while we can see what people remember from *a* message that seems relevant to the cultivation hypothesis, single messages do not influence social reality beliefs at all. The more difficult problem is linking particular encodings and memory of details to the long-term outcome of beliefs" (p. 37). Thus, cultivation occurs over a long period of time with substantive amounts of exposure. Because *Brothers & Sisters* was only half way through its second season at the time this thesis was written, a broader application of cultivation theory to the program over time may yield slightly different results. The model laid out in this pilot study, however, can be remolded to fit long-term exposure to *Brothers & Sisters* once the program is given television tenure.

There were two main methodological challenges presented in this thesis. The first was found in the content analysis methodology. Although political affiliations could be inferred for certain characters, inferences could not be drawn for all characters, even though the characters may have had certain affiliations in their back-story, i.e., the story not seen by viewers or coders. Had these affiliations been evident, the correlations determined between party affiliation and political opinions may have changed to show different relationships. For some coders, the use of rampant sarcasm by the characters when discussing their political views blurred the lines between positive and negative comments. To remedy this, coders identified the intent of the comment before declaring the nature of the comment and the party indicated by the remark. In replicating the study, researchers may be faced with the challenges created in discerning the

intent of sarcasm because of the perceptions of this study's coders and the coders of future study attempts. Similarly, the second methodological challenge was found in the recruitment of focus group participants. Although the show is popular in the 18-49 age category, the sample size of focus group participants was significantly positively skewed. A younger sample limits the use of resonance because of the lack of life events displayed within the program. Also, the sample that was drawn was convenient.

Beyond the limitations, the completion of this study was important because of television's power to transform culture. As Gerbner (1998) stated, "Television has become the common symbolic environment that interacts with most of the things we think and do. Exploring its dynamics can help develop an understanding of the forces of social cohesion, cultural dependence, and resistance to change…" (p. 192). The purpose of this thesis was twofold. First, an attempt was made to conduct a cultivation analysis on the political themes resulting from the ABC program *Brothers & Sisters*. As a result of this cultivation analysis, it was secondly anticipated that there may be challenges and implications to the traditional notions of cultivation theory as originally envisioned by Gerbner (as cited by Baker & Ball, 1969). At the end of this study, however, the power of television to shape culture was still intact.

The original studies conducted in the field of cultivation were heavily focused on crime and violence. According to the original findings, viewers who were more heavily exposed to crime dramas on television were more likely to perceive the world as more violent than it was in reality. When applying cultivation theory to a broader field of themes, notice must be given to the themes of study. For instance, crime in any culture is perceived with a negative connotation. This can be best understood by recognizing the nomenclature associated with crime. Crime dramas depict a victim that is harmed through the intentions and actions of a perpetrator.

Moreover, when a crime is committed, the perpetrator is either found guilty or the justice system's flaws are highlighted. In addition, crime dramas are often single-themed shows that focus on crime and crime fighting while other story lines are secondary. The same negative connotation may not apply to other genres of broadcast. Gerbner (1998) conceded that certain challenges of new genres of broadcast would eventually affect traditional cultivation analysis. "Humans are the only species that lives in a world erected by the stories they tell. The storytelling process used to be handcrafted, homemade, and community inspired. Now it is the end result of a complex manufacturing and marketing process. The situation calls for a new diagnosis and a new prescription" (p. 175).

Brothers & Sisters, one example of a program from a complicated genre of television that merges fact and fiction, is a multithemed program that has woven together several different storylines. Many of the themes are political in nature. Unlike crime, there are many different political philosophies; none of which are held in negative regard by society at large. While individual political practitioners may hold disdain for a rival party, the collective society merely views the philosophies as different. Because of *Brothers & Sisters'* multiple themes, exposure cannot be the only variable in determining levels of cultivation. Gerbner did not concede this in his original theoretical proposal (as cited by Baker & Ball, 1969).

Furthermore, just as Gerbner et al. (1984, 1986) believed that cultivation could be applied to subjects beyond crime and violence, *Brothers & Sisters* offers other timely subjects of study. For instance, it may have been premature to study perceptions of gay marriage from a cultivation perspective because television is still negotiating what it means to be gay. Many popular television shows, such as *Will & Grace*, are incorporating gay characters into their story lines. It was noticed during the content analysis that more conversations were had by characters about

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what it means to be gay than conversations about gay marriage. The lack of clear stereotypes may not fully resonate with a diverse audience. A beneficial study may examine that phenomenon to determine the commonly held stereotypes and perceptions of homosexuality. Other subjects of interest for scholars could be *Brothers & Sisters'* depiction of family relations and secret keeping. *Brothers & Sisters*, in its entirety, provides mass communication scholars with great research potential as American culture attempts to define contemporary political perspectives within the context of the modern family.

Potter (1993) noted that Gerbner's approach demonstrated that "Television exposure is regarded as the active influence that shapes the cultivation indicators. As a construct, it is conceptualized purely in terms of time. It does not matter what a person watches, only how much he or she watches" (p. 570). Because of the multiple story lines, broad audience appeal is feasible. While some story lines are political in nature, others are not. Cultivation can occur through any of the story lines depending upon the viewer's involvement with a particular story line. This builds on Potter's notion that the cultivation process is not linear as suggested by Gerbner et al. In interpreting results from a cultivation analysis, Shrum (1997) argued, "These conditions, taken together, may help explain why an overall cultivation effect can be elusive. Aspects of a situation (salience of source, involvement) and aspects of a sample (propensity to make source-confusion errors) may affect whether a cultivation effect is detected" (p. 356). In other words, accurate reporting of a cultivation analysis is difficult if involvement is not considered as a variable.

Even in consideration of this new theoretical implication for cultivation theory, the power of television to shift culture is still evident. Regardless of cultivation methodologies, "[t]elevision is a centralized system of story-telling. Its drama, commercials, news, and other

programs being a relatively coherent system of images and messages into every home. That system cultivates from infancy the predispositions and preferences that used to be acquired from other 'primary' sources…" (Gerbner, 1998, p. 177). Through the use of mainstreaming, large and diverse audiences are exposed to the same messages. Individually and collectively, as demonstrated in this study's focus groups, sense is made of the messages and perceptions are developed. In other words, a social reality is constructed. "The process of reality construction is defined as *social* because it can be carried out only through social interaction, either real or symbolic. The social construction of reality is a dialectical process in which human beings act as both the creators and as products of their social world" (Adoni & Mane, 1984, p. 325). For cultivation analyses to be successful and accurate when applied to modern programming, the identification of involvement is critical. The analysis of *Brothers & Sisters* undertaken in this thesis ideally illustrated the role that involvement contributes to a reliable study of political cultivation.

APPENDIX A:
CONTENT ANALYSIS CODING SCHEME

Political Rhetoric	Said By:					
Positive Comment About Republicans						
Negative Comment About Republicans						
Positive Comment About Democrats						
Negative Comment About Democrats						

	To	From	Affil	To	From	Affil
Positive Comment About Individual Affiliation						
Negative Comment About Individual Affiliation						

Military Opinions — Said By: Nature: Before/After Justin's First Deployment

Gay Marriage Opinions — Said By: Nature:

Economic Issues:	From	To	Fam Biz	Auth	Stat	Reb	Reb Auth	Reb Stat

President Bush:	From	To	Nature	Direct?	From	To	Nature	Direct?

Notes:

APPENDIX B:
IRB APPROVAL LETTER

University of Central Florida

Notice of Expedited Initial Review and Approval

From :   **UCF Institutional Review Board**
FWA00000351, Exp. 5/07/10, IRB00001138

To   :   **Scott Elmore**

Date :   **February 11, 2008**

IRB Number: **SBE-08-05426**

Study Title: **Brothers and Sisters: A New Impetus for Social Construction and its Impact on Traditional Cultivation Analysis**

Dear Researcher:

Your research protocol noted above was approved by **expedited** review by the UCF IRB Chair on 2/11/2008. **The expiration date is 2/10/2009.** Your study was determined to be minimal risk for human subjects and expeditable per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.110. The category for which this study qualifies as expeditable research is as follows:

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

The IRB has approved a **consent procedure which requires participants to sign consent forms.** Use of the approved, stamped consent document(s) is required. Only approved investigators (or other approved key study personnel) may solicit consent for research participation. Subjects or their representatives must receive a copy of the consent form(s).

All data, which may include signed consent form documents, must be retained in a locked file cabinet for a minimum of three years (six if HIPAA applies) past the completion of this research. Any links to the identification of participants should be maintained on a password-protected computer if electronic information is used. Additional requirements may be imposed by your funding agency, your department, or other entities. Access to data is limited to authorized individuals listed as key study personnel.

To continue this research beyond the expiration date, a Continuing Review Form must be submitted 2 – 4 weeks prior to the expiration date. Advise the IRB if you receive a subpoena for the release of this information, or if a breach of confidentiality occurs. Also report any unanticipated problems or serious adverse events (within 5 working days). Do not make changes to the protocol methodology or consent form before obtaining IRB approval. Changes can be submitted for IRB review using the Addendum/Modification Request Form. An Addendum/Modification Request Form **cannot** be used to extend the approval period of a study. All forms may be completed and submitted online at http://iris.research.ucf.edu .

Failure to provide a continuing review report could lead to study suspension, a loss of funding and/or publication possibilities, or reporting of noncompliance to sponsors or funding agencies. The IRB maintains the authority under 45 CFR 46.110(e) to observe or have a third party observe the consent process and the research.

On behalf of Tracy Dietz, Ph.D., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 02/11/2008 02:40:07 PM EST

Joanne Muratori

IRB Coordinator

APPENDIX C:
INFORMED CONSENT AGREEMENT

Informed Consent

You have been asked to take part in this research study because you are a viewer of the ABC television program, *Brothers & Sisters*. To participate in this study, you must meet three criteria. First, you must be 18 years of age or older to be included in the research study and sign this form. Second, participants must be familiar with the premise of the show, preferably having seen at least one episode. Third, participants must attend one of three focus group meetings and discuss the program.

Study title: *Brothers & Sisters*: A New Impetus for Social Construction and Its Impact on Traditional Cultivation Research.

Researcher: The person doing this research is Scott Elmore, a master's candidate in the UCF Nicholson School of Communication. Because the researcher is a master's student he is being guided by Dr. Richard Kenney, a UCF faculty supervisor in the Nicholson School of Communication.

Purpose of the research study: The purpose of this study is to conduct focus group research that will provide the researcher with data to understand how and what people learn from fictional television.

What you will be asked to do in the study: You will be asked to complete this form to indicate your willingness to participate in a focus group. You will also be asked to complete a simple demographic survey about your viewing habits of *Brothers & Sisters*. You will also be asked to participate in a group discussion regarding the content of the show and your thoughts about the show.

Voluntary participation: You should take part in this study only because you want to. There is no penalty for not taking part. You have the right to stop at any time. Just tell the researcher that you want to stop. You will be told if any new information is learned which may affect your willingness to continue taking part in this study.

Location: Each focus group will be held on the UCF campus in the Communication Building. (Room assignments are TBA at this time.)

Time required: Each participant will select which of three one-hour focus group sessions to attend. Each participant only needs to attend one session. These groups will be scheduled to best accommodate busy schedules. Group sessions will happen outside of class time.

Audio taping: You will be audio taped during this study. If you do not want to be audio taped, you may not be able to be in the study. Discuss this with the researcher. The session will be transcribed and the audio recording will be destroyed.

Risks: There are no expected risks for taking part in this study. As you may know from watching *Brothers & Sisters*, several of the show's themes revolve around political and social issues. The point of this focus group is not to challenge each other's views but to identify show characteristics which lead viewers to think one way or another. You do not have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. A breach of confidentially (described below) is a risk associated with research based on sensitive topics, like political affiliation.

Benefits: As a research participant you will not benefit directly from this research, besides learning more about how research is conducted. The study will make a contribution to the research literature on cultivation theory.

Compensation or payment: There is no direct compensation for taking part in this study. It is possible, however, that extra credit may be offered for your participation, but this benefit is at the discretion of your instructor. If your instructor is offering extra credit for your participation and you do not wish to participate or you are ineligible to participate, please contact your instructor for details about an alternative extra credit assignment.

Confidentiality: The researcher will make every effort to keep your identifiable information confidential. Your real name will not be linked to any information gathered (except for this agreement) during the course of this study. The email address used to make initial contact with you will be stored on password-protected hard drive until the completion of the study and will subsequently be deleted. Demographic surveys and focus group transcripts will be kept for three years, but no identifiable information will be solicited for those documents. Your information will be combined with information from other people who took part in this study. When the researcher writes about this study to share what was learned with other researchers, he will write about this combined information. A pseudonym will be used in place of your name. While it is impossible to guarantee confidentiality when focus groups are used in research, all participants are asked to maintain the confidentiality of other participants and not reveal information to those outside the focus group.

Study contact for questions about the study or to report a problem: Scott Elmore, Graduate Student, Nicholson School of Communication via email at elmore_sr@yahoo.com or Dr. Richard Kenney, Faculty Advisor, Nicholson School of Communication at (407) 823-2681 or by email at rkenney@pegasus.cc.ucf.edu.

IRB contact about your rights in the study or to report a complaint: Research at the University of Central Florida involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board (UCF IRB). For information about the rights of people who take part in research, please contact: Institutional Review Board, University of Central Florida, Office of Research & Commercialization, 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501, Orlando, FL 32826-3246 or by telephone at (407) 823-2901.

How to return this consent form to the researcher: Please sign this consent form and return it to the researcher at the start of the focus group. A second copy is provided for your records. By signing this letter, you give me permission to report your responses anonymously in the final manuscript to be submitted to my faculty supervisor as part of my course work.

* I have read the procedure described above   * I agree to be audio taped

* I voluntarily agree to take part in the procedure   * I do not agree to be audio taped

* I am at least 18 years of age or older

_____   _____   _____

Signature of participant   Printed name of participant   Date

_____   _____

Principal Investigator   Date

APPENDIX D:
FOCUS GROUP DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Focus Group Demographic Survey

Alias: _____ Age: _____ Gender: Male Female

Race: _____

Class: Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior Graduate Other: _____

I consider myself this type of *Brothers & Sisters* viewer:

I've seen it once   I've seen 1-4 episodes I've only missed 1-4 episodes

I watch every week   I never miss an episode

My favorite character is: _____

My least favorite character is: _____

Is *Brothers & Sisters* currently your favorite show on television? Yes No

Please circle any other activities you undertake while watching *Brothers &* Sisters:

I devote the entire hour to the show

Do homework	Play with a pet	Work
Talk with family/friends	Surf the internet/email	Other (please list):
Do laundry	Pay bills	
Cook dinner	Exercise	

Do you record, TiVo or DVR *Brothers & Sisters*? Yes No

If yes, why? _____

_____

APPENDIX E:
FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What do you most enjoy about the program *Brothers & Sisters*?

2. Who is your favorite character?

    a. Why do you like that character?

3. Is there a specific character with whom you identify?

4. Which characters best represent their policy issues?

    a. For example, do you think Kevin is an "authority" source on gay marriage?

    b. What about Kitty who plays the show's know-it-all?

5. What, if any, statistic or fact on this show (or another) have you heard and used in a conversation with a friend or family member?

    a. Do you attribute that statistic or fact to the show?

6. What have you learned from this show?

7. How accurately does this show represent modern American family life?

    a. Television shows normally portray the siblings as children. This show portrays them as adults. What do you think this adds to the family dynamic?

        i. Does this add to the credibility of the characters?

8. How accurately does this show represent modern American family values?

    a. Does this show accurately represent your family values?

    b. Where are the discrepancies?

9. How well does this show fully represent all the views on policy issues?

    a. What aspects do you see that represent a full political spectrum?

    b. What stereotypes are portrayed in the show?

    c. Which characters represent those political stereotypes?

    d. How does the use of stereotypes add or subtract from the show dynamic?

10. Do you think voters agree with how the show portrays the war in Iraq?

a. What, if any, perspectives from the show resonate with you about the war?

11. Do you think voters agree with how the show portrays civil rights, like gay marriage?

    a. What, if any, perspectives from the show resonate with you about gay marriage?

12. What has this show taught you anything about drug use and its effect on family relations?

13. Fidelity and divorce are major points of discussion in the show. Do you think this is a major issue in the real world?

    a. How does the frequent mention of divorce and fidelity change your view on the issue?

14. The show uses images of President Bush. How does this add to the notion of television as a political forum?

15. How does the show portray Senator McCallister?

    a. Do you think that is how campaigns really happen?

    b. Is he someone you would vote for?

        i. What in his platform do you find agreeable?

        ii. How does his party label play a role in your decision in supporting him?

        iii. Do you think he represents the typical politician in America? Why?

16. Do you think there is any validity to the notion that people who are intensely involved in a certain program have a skewed sense of reality?

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