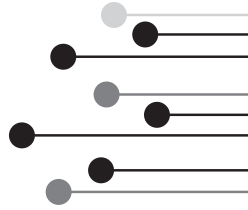


Interpreting and Decoding Mass Media Texts



One of the more popular programs on the basic cable TV service The Learning Channel (TLC) in the mid-2000s was a reality TV series called *Jon & Kate Plus 8*. The program followed the day-to-day challenges of Jon and Kate Gosselin, a suburban couple whose attempts to conceive one more child following the birth of twins resulted in sextuplets. While the original premise of the show was to provide a lighthearted diary of the couple's daily life, the program became tabloid fodder in late 2008 (two seasons into the show) when the celebrity status of the parents and the daily strain of the cameras began to take a toll on the couple's marriage.¹ Soon, reports of an impending marital breakdown appeared regularly in gossip columns, in supermarket tabloids, and on entertainment news programs. When the episode documenting the couple's decision to separate was finally aired on June 22, 2009, the audience for the basic cable program spiked to a record-breaking 10.6 million viewers, the largest audience in the history of TLC (Stelter, 2009).

While the splashy tabloid covers and intense publicity surrounding this celebrity couple were certainly attention-grabbing, one fascinating aspect of this reality TV breakup was the intensity and diversity of viewers' responses. Individuals posted hundreds of messages about the episode and what they thought about it on blogs, comment sections of newspapers, and the official TLC website for the program itself:

What a sad day for the institution of marriage and the lives of Jon, Kate and their family. Marriage is supposed to be a lifetime commitment—we all took the vow “in good times and in bad.” People don't seem to remember that vow. Marriage as in life has its ups and downs, its good times and bad times. When we hit a bad patch in life do we pack it in and give up? No, we weather through it, work things out and emerge better for the experience—marriage is no different.

This family was destroyed by the quest for fame. When Kate Gosselin started referring to traveling around the country hawking books about how “we're just a regular family” while earning untold amounts of

¹In a fascinating case of history repeating itself, the breakdown of the Gosselin's marriage in the midst of a reality TV series harkens back to the first reality TV program called *An American Family*, which was a 1973 PBS program that followed the everyday lives of a suburban family in California, the Louds. During the course of the series, the Louds separated, and one of their sons, Lance, revealed on national television that he was gay (for more information, see Conan, 2009; Ruoff, 2001).

money from a TV show as “her work,” and making comments about how she’d like a talk show, I knew the marriage wasn’t going to work out. Her priorities are just in the wrong place.

Voyeurism and child abuse for profit.

This is VERY sad. I must say, I could see it coming, but I was hoping with all of my heart that the two of you could work things out. My parents divorced when I was a child, and it was very, very traumatic for me. Now, 15 years later, I am still dealing with the pain of it. I must admit, however, that divorce was the best option in my parents’ case. The constant arguing, fighting, crying and seeing my mother SO depressed was really wearing on me. I remember I used to write her “Daily Messages” that would have something I loved about her or something silly to cheer her up. Anyways, divorce is very difficult on a family, it does have the potential to mess these kids up for the rest of their lives, or it could be a relatively easy transition. The thing that killed me the most was although my father said he would always be there, he just bailed. I never heard from him or saw him again.

Hey folks, it is what it is, watch it or not, it’s what TLC wants. Drama! It’s all about money, and nothing else. The kids are screwed, Jon and Kate got loads of money, and ya know what for the rest of us? Life goes on, get over it, it’s entertainment either way. (Stelter, 2009)

Source: Stelter, B. (2009, June 23). “Jon and Kate” Split-Up Draws Record-Breaking Audience. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/23/jon-and-kate-split-up-draws-record-breaking-audience/?scp=10&sq=jon%20and%20kate&st=cse>

As you can see from this small sample, audience members’ interpretations of the show ranged widely. Viewers were saddened by the couple’s divorce, critical of either Jon or Kate as the reason for the separation, and critical of the TLC network for being voyeuristic and exploiting the personal tragedy of a family. Some people familiar with the program felt that they could relate to the trials of Jon and Kate due to experiences with divorce in their own lives, while others (see the last response) were deeply ambivalent about the entire reality show genre, dismissing it as no more than cheap exploitation of individuals’ lives for viewership and profit.

How can we possibly understand these diverse and potentially conflicting audience responses to *Jon & Kate*? One might simply suggest that each individual is entitled to his or her opinion, so there will naturally be as many different interpretations of *Jon & Kate* as there are viewers. Such a conclusion, however, denies the analytical possibility that individuals’ interpretations of mass media may be connected in some way. This sort of epistemological stance hardly appeals to scholars and media theorists. What if there were similarities in audiences’ understandings of media content? What would account for these similarities and how could we

better understand *patterns* among certain types of audiences in their reactions to mediated content? These questions are the focus of this chapter, which will provide an overview of theories of media interpretation. Like the uses and gratifications theories we explored in Chapter 5, scholars of media interpretation take as a given the notion of media audiences as actively engaged with media technologies. What distinguishes media interpretation from other uses-oriented theories of audiences is that the main concern shifts here to the *content* of the media. Rather than ask what *motivates* audiences to select media content, scholars of media interpretation look even more closely at how audiences respond to *specific aspects of media content*.

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter will focus on audience interpretations of popular media. We will begin with semiotics, the study of significant signs in society. Semiotics explores how individuals come to understand their reality through the creation and use of signs. This approach became central in the work of cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall, who focused on the process of audiences' "decoding" of media texts. As we will see in this chapter, Hall's work was the intellectual spark that launched a number of important studies in the 1980s that linked social class, gender, and race with specific media interpretations (Ang, 1985; Jhally & Lewis, 1992; Morley, 1980; Radway, 1984). The notion of audience choice and activity was pushed even further in the late 1980s, when scholars considered audience interpretation as a kind of liberation from the media text, leading some to ask whether or not the original media text even mattered anymore (Fiske, 1987). Toward the end of chapter, we will examine the legacy of these vigorous debates about the relative power of the audience to interpret media content by examining recent comparative work on popular TV programs such as *Friends*, *The Cosby Show*, *The Simpsons*, and *The Bold and the Beautiful*. We'll also consider how theories of audience interpretation are being reimagined in a digital era.

The Rise of Critical Cultural Studies

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In order to contextualize the discussion about interpretation later in the chapter, it is necessary to explore the rise of critical cultural studies in the 1980s. The study of media audiences underwent two important shifts during this time period. The first was a theoretical shift toward a more **critically oriented approach to audience reception** of media. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the rising prominence of the uses and gratifications perspective led some to question some of its basic tenets: Were media audiences truly as autonomous as the uses and gratifications perspective imagined? In an influential essay in the early 1980s titled "The Rediscovery of 'Ideology': Return of the Repressed in Media Studies," British cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (1982) argued that a major shift was under way from a "behavioralist" paradigm (the underlying assumption of theories such as uses and gratifications) to a more critical approach to media and culture. The key

drawback of the mainstream behaviorist approach, he explained, was its inextricable link to the methodological and conceptual limitations of positivistic social science. Hall reasoned that the focus on immediate, short-term effects of communication messages on individuals ignored historical shifts, questions of power and social domination, and the role of economic and other institutions on social structures. These larger issues simply did not fit into the theoretical framework of behaviorism. Additionally, since the dominant view considered communication as a process of *transmission* from a message source to a receiver, questions about specific engagements with the *content* of media texts were also left unaddressed. What if individuals made alternative and radical reinterpretations of media messages? Were only those on the margins of society engaged in this type of activity, or were challenges to the institutional authority of media a common occurrence among those receiving media content? Questions about the relative autonomy of the audience vis-à-vis the dominant ideologies found in mainstream media texts (also dubbed the “incorporation/resistance” paradigm) became the focal point for discussion and debate among critical media scholars in the 1980s (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998, p. 15).

The second shift was methodological: Rather than relying upon surveys and other forms of self-reporting to ascertain how audiences were digesting media, critical **media scholars began adopting the technique of ethnography** from the sociological and anthropological disciplines. This had two important consequences. First, researchers were freed from relying upon the self-reports of research subjects, allowing them to distance themselves from their subjects and critically analyze individuals’ media consumption behaviors. In addition, the use of ethnography was also a conscious political choice for some researchers. This form of study offered audiences the opportunity to speak for themselves, instead of having their voice and sense of agency suppressed by institutional market research and scholarly investigation. Scholar Ann Gray noted that her use of qualitative observations and interviews “was often motivated by a desire to allow participants to have some say in the research agenda” (1999, p. 32). Ethnographic methods were not without their complications. Scholars’ interpretation of observed audience behaviors and interview responses required them to insert themselves into the research process. This raised some interesting issues about the extent of audience autonomy from the media text.

Interpretation and Semiotics

The key to comprehending the notion of interpretation is to first understand how the process of communicating ideas and experiences takes place. We use *signs* to help us achieve understanding with one another. The systematic study of signs and their significance in society is called **semiotics**. Semiotics has also been referred to as “the study of everything that can be used for communication: words, images, traffic signs, flowers, music, medical symptoms, and much more. Semiotics studies the way such ‘signs’ communicate and the rules that

Figure 6.1 Saussure's Dyadic Model of a Sign



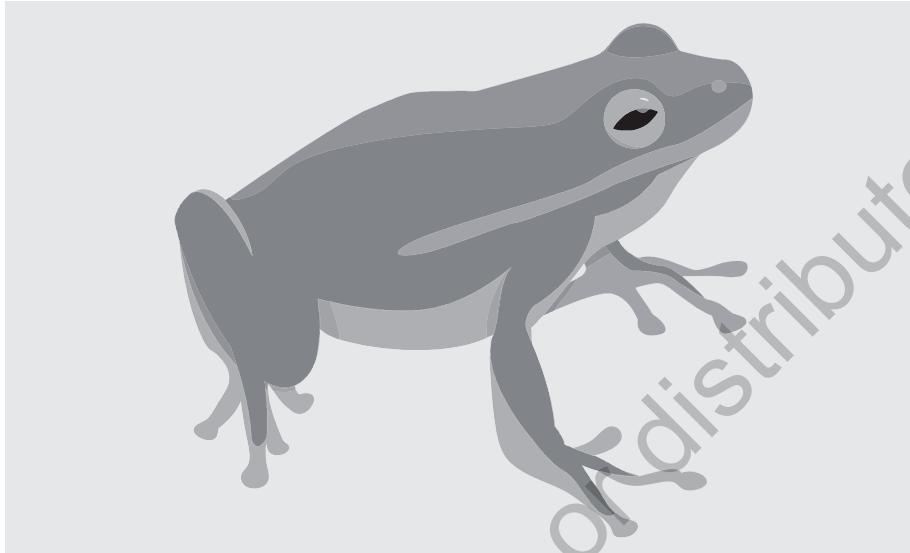
Source: Adapted from de Saussure, Ferdinand 1983): *Course in General Linguistics* (trans. Roy Harris). London: Duckworth. Found at <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem02.html>

govern their use” (Seiter, 1992, p. 23). The foundational principles of semiotics became indispensable for media scholars in the 1970s and 1980s as they turned their attention to the strategies employed by audiences to understand their media environment.

French scholar of linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) is considered to be the primary figure in the field of semiotics. De Saussure became fascinated by the building blocks of language and meaning production. He developed a *dyadic*, or two-part, model for explaining how communication takes place through all forms of linguistic communication. Saussure argued that the process of human communication is dependent upon the creation of **signs**—words, images, objects, acts. Without the transmission of signs from one person to the next, no communication is possible. Signs can be quite simple and straightforward (such as an image of a flower) or complicated (such as a chemical formula, which perhaps describes the biological makeup of one component of the flower). Signs *refer* to things that they are not. They are markers that contain vital information about the experience, object, or idea that is being referred to (see Figure 6.1). Signs are defined by the interaction between two specific elements: the **signifier**, or the form of the sign, and the **signified or referent**, which is the concept the signifier represents (De Saussure, 2000).

A short intellectual exercise can demonstrate the interplay between signifier and signified. Take a look at the image that appears in Figure 6.2 and identify it. If you are thinking that it is a frog, then you are only partially correct. Certainly,

Figure 6.2



Source: Stephanie Plumeri Ertz.

it is an *image* of a frog, but it is not the little green animal that jumps around in ponds and makes a croaking noise. Now, observe Figure 6.3 and attempt to identify that image. As you can see, it is composed of four specific letters in the English language that, when placed one right after the other in this order, spell the word *frog*. This also brings to mind a green or brown amphibian that jumps

Figure 6.3



Source: Stephanie Plumeri Ertz.

and croaks. These two figures are similar because they are both signs (or, to use de Saussure's terminology, signifiers). The thing to which these signs point (and the thing that you associated it with in your mind) is the referent. There are also differences between these two figures. You may have noticed that the first image was a pictorial representation of the frog—it more closely resembled the thing itself. In the second figure, we see a collection of words—you probably recognized only the last one, *frog*, as having any meaning. The others are the same word translated into different languages. These signs also refer to the original “thing” but this time using a complex code called language to communicate that concept. If you are not familiar with the structure or syntax of the language, then you will be unable to “decode” the sign from looking at the collection of characters on the page and form a mental picture of an actual frog in your mind.

There are two important points to emphasize about the semiotic approach. The first is that **the connection between signs and referents is not given or “natural” but is instead the result of human social relations and the rules of particular symbolic codes.** The creation, distribution, and reception of signs are at the center of ongoing shifts within societies since they are the products of those societies and not etched in stone. The second point is something of a corollary to the first: **Since the connection between signs and referents is never natural, it is therefore always changing and subject to power relations.** Those in power will inevitably attempt to assign specific meanings to signs and to identify these meanings as “common sense”—this is the function of ideology. Conversely, the tenuous connections between signs and referents also provide space for outsiders to begin to challenge the status quo through the contestation of language and meanings. The derogatory term for homosexuals, *queer*, for instance, has been profoundly altered by gay and lesbian activists, who took the term and transformed it into a marker of gay pride and social activism. The notions of societal shift and power relations link the study of interpretation of transmission of signs with political economy (see Chapter 4). As we'll see next, critical media scholars in the 1980s sought to bring Karl Marx's theories of capital and class domination back into the center of media analysis.

Ideology, Screen Theory, and the Critical Paradigm

In the 1970s, scholars began looking closely at individual media texts as a means to explore the connections between the mass media and **ideology**. The study of ideology is primarily concerned with “the ways in which meaning and power intersect . . . ways in which meaning may serve, in specific socio-historical contexts, to sustain relations of domination” (Thompson, 1988, p. 370). In the Marxist school of thought, the study of media and communications had traditionally taken a back seat to more basic critiques of capitalism such as worker alienation and

income inequality. Classic Marxist theory assumed that the press and the media generally serve the interests of the ruling class, but Marx's writings did not shed any light on the mechanisms through which this might take place. In the 1930s, a group of German intellectuals formed a research collective called the **Frankfurt School** that aimed to understand the role of the media from a Marxist perspective (see Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972, 2001). They identified modern media such as radio, television, and magazines as purveyors of industrialized, standardized culture meant to lull the masses into passivity and acceptance of the economic status quo. They classified this process of manufacturing dominant ideologies as the **culture industry**. Scholars interested in pursuing a "culture industry" critique of the media were a small minority in the postwar years, largely due to the institutionalization of communication studies in the United States as primarily a positivistic, effect-oriented endeavor (see Chapter 2 for an overview of the effects tradition in audience studies). However, the publication of an influential essay by French Marxist scholar Louis Althusser in the 1970s placed ideological critiques of the media firmly back on the scholarly agenda.

Althusser's essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," was written in the 1960s and translated into English in 1971. The piece had a "profound impact on sections of the British academic Left" (Moore, 1993, p. 12). In this essay, Althusser (2001) addressed the issue of how the power of the state is substantiated and insulated from any possible challenge from would-be revolutionaries. According to Althusser, traditional state apparatuses such as the police, army, courts, and prisons all work to uphold the status quo through the "functions of violence." If these were the only forms of social control, he argued, then they would be easily visible to the public and quickly identified as repressive. Citizens would respond to these obvious methods of dominance, inciting protest and revolutionary change. However, nonphysical forms of ideological control engineer the consent of the governed, protecting inequities in modern industrialized societies. Althusser cited a number of these "ideological state apparatuses" (or ISAs), such as the church (or other forms of organized religion), the educational system, the family, trade unions, and forms of modern communication such as the press, radio, and television (Althusser, 2001, p. 80). In fact, he went so far as to argue that "no class can hold State power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses" (2001, p. 81).

Critical scholars took particular interest in Althusser's mention of the media as a focal point of the ideological domination of society and began looking closely at media texts (particularly motion pictures) for evidence of these ideological formations at work. These scholars saw themselves as the "vanguard of revolutionary struggle" (Moore, 1993, p. 12) through their analyses of the ideological functions of mainstream media. A new generation of scholars began using Althusser's Marxist analysis of culture to study the ideological underpinnings of mainstream motion picture texts. For instance, a 1974 film studies article proposed that commercial films work by "constructing an illusion of transparency" such that the film effectively "denies its own material existence as text" (Moore, 1993, p. 13). Film

viewers' sense of reality, then, is essentially controlled via the "imaginary unitary," and viewers are subsequently unable to separate themselves from the film's reality because it becomes invisible and normalized. This focus on the ideological messages embedded within the structures of the film text became known as **screen theory**. Proponents of screen theory suggested that mainstream media representations also reinforce the bourgeois status quo through narrative and visual strategies, thereby forestalling any attempt by the audience to subvert the text. The antidote to these dominant messages was found in the "revolutionary" filmmaking of avant-garde filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein and Jean-Luc Goddard. These directors brought the machinery of the filmmaking industry to the foreground in their work, allowing the audience to observe the message creation process and obtain a critical distance from the "artificial" reality of the film.

Screen theory became a powerful force in critical media scholarship in the late 1970s, but there were several major problems with the approach. First, the theory seemed to condemn all mainstream, commercial media texts as incapable of maintaining any critical distance from the economic and social status quo. A second issue with the theory was that it seemed to advocate **textual determinism**—that is, it suggested that audiences' interpretations of mainstream media content were already predetermined by the structure of the text itself. The only interpretive option open to the viewer, then, was to respond in the way that was intended by the original producer of the message. In this way, the media served its function as an ISA.

The Birmingham School and the Encoding/Decoding Model

The very limited subject positioning offered to the audience by screen theory did not sit well with a group of critical scholars at the Birmingham University Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (or CCCS, for short) in England. Convinced that the reception process was more nuanced and that audiences were much more active in their interpretations of specific media texts, members of the CCCS began mapping out an alternative theoretical model of the interactions between media texts and readers. The Birmingham group argued that audiences approached media texts with a repertoire of cultural competencies and discursive experiences that would profoundly shape their understandings of messages, regardless of the meanings intended by the creator of the text. While the scholars of the CCCS recognized the power of the text to structure potential interpretations, they also imagined audiences as active decoders of media texts, leaving conceptual room for them to challenge these meanings. For Hall and others at the Birmingham Centre, social class was the primary lens through which audiences crafted their symbolic responses to media, which fit squarely within their work with youth subcultures (Murdock, 2017).

Perhaps the single-most influential essay that developed from the Birmingham group's work was "Encoding/Decoding" by Stuart Hall (1980). In this essay, Hall addressed what he perceived to be the shortcomings of two dominant paradigms in audience studies: uses and gratifications (see Chapter 5) and screen theory. As we will see later on in the chapter, Hall's essay inspired a number of important qualitative audience studies in the 1980s.

The Encoding/Decoding Model

Hall explained that there are two "determining moments" in any communication exchange: **encoding** and **decoding**. Hall's use of the term *determining* does not imply that he subscribed to a theory of textual determination, however. Instead, he saw these events as moments in which the meaning of a message or text was subject to human intervention and therefore involved power relations. The first determining moment, according to Hall, occurs when a message producer (such as a television journalist or a podcaster) successfully **encodes the message**. The creator must place an idea or event or experience in a format that will be meaningful for audiences. To transmit an event via television, it must first be transformed using "the aural-visual forms of the televisual discourse. . . . To put it paradoxically, the event must become a 'story' before it can become a *communicative event*" (emphasis in original; Hall, 1980, p. 129). This is where systems of language as well as professional codes of production and conventions of message production come into play. In the news business, for example, there are standard practices that determine (1) what types of events qualify as news and (2) how news events are designed and structured for presentation to a mass audience. This is the first part of the interpretive work involved in a communication exchange.

The second component is the reception of the message by the audience, which Hall calls the **decoding process**. Before any communication message can "have an effect, influence, entertain, instruct, or persuade," it must be "appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded" (Hall, 1980, p. 130). Since our goal in this text is to explore theories of the audience, the decoding process is of greatest interest to us. The encoding process transforms experiences and ideas into meaningful discourse within existing social, economic, and cultural contexts. Audiences then interpret these messages within their own contexts. Decoding is therefore both a *creative* and a *social* practice; creative because the message receiver brings to bear his or her own cognitive and associative resources to the deconstruction of a message and social because the receiver is also informed by larger-meaning structures such as language, community norms, and cultural conventions.

Media Encoding: Institutions and Production Cultures

Let's briefly discuss the factors that shape the *encoding* of media messages, which is the first half of the model. As Hall (1980) explained in his seminal essay,

ideas, thoughts, or experiences need first to be expressed in terms of specific signs (signification) in order for them to be transmitted to an audience. In this sense, Hall's term *encoding* can be understood in a literal sense: Experiences are essentially translated into a specific code (language, for example) and format (speech, visual images, sounds, etc.) such that they could be understood by others. There were numerous factors that guided this encoding process. In the case of television programs, for example, Hall supposed:

The institutional structures of broadcasting, with their practices and networks of production, their organized relations and technical infrastructures, are required to produce a programme. Using the analogy of *Capital*, this is the "labour process" in the discursive mode. Production, here, constructs the message. In one sense, then, the circuit begins here. Of course, the production process is not without its "discursive" aspect: it, too, is framed throughout by meanings and ideas: knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience and so on frame the constitution of the programme through this production structure. (Hall, 1980, p. 129)

Hall is referring here to the social, economic, and political structures that guide the industrialized production of media. In this sense, Hall was building upon earlier Marxist concepts outlined by the Frankfurt School about the mass production of ideological messages via institutional control. But Hall's notion of encoding was more comprehensive and expansive than that of the Frankfurt School or Althusser's. Hall imagined a number of different types of influences on the encoding of media messages that went beyond the maintenance of the economic status quo through ideological state apparatuses.

For example, television programs are created by individuals working within large organizations. These organizations, like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in the United Kingdom or the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) in the United States, have highly skilled workers that specialize in a particular aspect of this production process, whether it be acting, scripting, camera work, editing, or working in the control room. These workers have training and are also socialized into doing their work in particular kinds of ways through organizational rules and routines. In his classic book *Deciding What's News*, for instance, scholar Herbert Gans (1980) conducted interviews with editors and journalists to discover how these individuals defined *news* (what is newsworthy) and how they translated events into a news story that was appropriate to print (and that would satisfy their editors). More recent studies of the news business have examined the impacts of the Internet and digitalization on the organizational structures and routines (see Boczkowski, 2004; Nadler, 2016). For a good example of how encoding and decoding operates within a specific news environment, see Box 6.1 on pg. 177.

Figure 6.4 Hierarchical Model of Factors Affecting the Production of Media Content

Social systems	Larger social structures; organization of media system (democratic, controlled); ideology; economic basis of media production (capitalism, state-controlled)
Social institutions	Journalism and media production norms (reliance on official sources, reliance on advertising, state control of media, public relations)
Media organizations	Expenses, revenues, ownership of media organizations, roles, structure, profitability, platform, target audience, influence from advertisers, and market competition
Routines and practices	<i>Journalism:</i> News values, objectivity, norms for newsworthiness, timeliness of stories, proximity, fact-checking <i>Entertainment:</i> Casting, hiring of talent, genres of programming, production decision-making, audience research, scheduling and distribution decisions
Individuals	Individual's professional roles, work and personal background, ethics, personal attitudes, values, beliefs

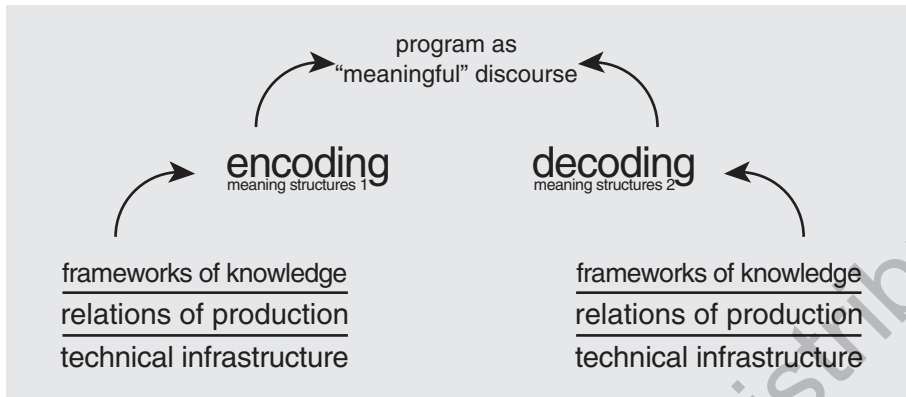
Source: Adapted from Shoemaker, P. J., & Reese, S. D. (2013). *Mediating the Message in the 21st Century: A Media Sociology Perspective* (1 edition). New York, NY: Routledge.

Todd Gitlin (1983) conducted a similar type of encoding analysis in the early 1980s when he interviewed American television executives to find out why some shows and genres were regularly approved and why some were not. The many different structural and localized influences on the industrial production of media have even spawned their own specialization within media research called production studies (Mayer, Banks, & Caldwell, 2009). Shoemaker and Reese (2013) have organized these various influences into a hierarchical model (see Figure 6.4) to demonstrate the complexity of the different types of pressures that guide the encoding of media forms.

Message Asymmetry and Multiple Levels of Meaning

Given the fact that the encoding of media messages was subject to the influence of human meaning structures outlined previously, Hall also noted that this created the likelihood (and, indeed, the inevitability) for “asymmetry” between the message producer(s) and the audience. Put another way, there is always a chance of various “degrees of understanding and misunderstanding” in any communication exchange. For Hall, symmetry of interpretation between television producers

Figure 6.5 The Encoding/Decoding Process



Source: Adapted from Hall, S. (1980). *Encoding/Decoding*. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), "Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies" (p. 130). London, England: Hutchinson. Redrawn by Stephanie Plumeri Ertz.

and viewers is a function of the "structural differences of relation and position between broadcasters and audiences, but it also has something to do with the asymmetry between the codes of 'source' and 'receiver' at the moment of transformation into and out of the discursive form" (1980, p. 131). The subject position of the audience, then, results in quite a different orientation to the message, resulting in mismatches between the producer's intended meaning and the meaning received by the audience (see Figure 6.5).

How exactly do audiences interpret communication messages? To explain this phenomenon, Hall turned to semiotics and linguistics, drawing upon the material that was outlined in the early part of this chapter. In decoding specific messages, audiences react to both the **denotative level of meaning**—the literal, "near-universal," or commonsense meaning of the sign—and the **connotative level of meaning**—or contextualized understandings of signs. This difference is similar to the disparity between what we often refer to as the "surface" meaning of an image or text and its related "subtext" (what one can *infer* from the text itself given a specific set of cultural codes and experiences). Hall described "situational ideologies" that were found at the connotative level and shaped meaning for audiences. He drew upon the work of French theorist Roland Barthes (1987), who argued that denotations are what we often learn first but that they contain ideological subject positions that guide us toward specific types of meanings (so, therefore, there is no "natural" meaning for a particular sign). Connotations, on the other hand, leave the meaning of the sign open to wider interpretations.

Polysemy and Three Subject Positions

Texts (whether print, pictorial, or televisual) are **polysemic**, capable of being interpreted in distinctly different ways by different viewers because audiences approach texts with a plethora of experiences and cultural knowledge of signs. However, Hall stressed that this empowerment of the audience vis-à-vis message producers was not absolute since it relied upon the social processes of meaning construction among the audience. Hall posited three “hypothetical positions” from which media decoding could take place. First, he argued that some viewers might take a **dominant-hegemonic position**, in which they might accept the media message exactly in terms of the code in which it was produced. The viewer would operate inside the dominant ideology by accepting the transfer of packaged meanings without a great deal of reflection, regarding the transaction as a simple dissemination of information. Hall argued that audiences were more likely to stake out what he termed a **negotiated position**. The individual would interpret the message with “a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements” (1980, p. 137). Viewers making negotiated readings of texts relate to and understand the dominant code, but they also filter media content through the lens of their own individualized experiences and worldview. For example, a working-class person watching a television news story about a new law to restrict frivolous worker compensation lawsuits may understand and even agree with the premise of the law but would nevertheless feel entitled to file such a lawsuit should he or she become injured on the job.

Finally, Hall argued that some viewers may take a media text and “decode the message in a *globally contrary way*. He/she detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference” (emphasis in original; 1980, pp. 137–138). These viewers occupy an **oppositional position** by focusing exclusively on the connotative meanings of the signs in order to mount an ideological struggle against the message and/or its producers. Box 6.1 outlines one example of how viewers may construct oppositional readings of mass media.

Hall’s groundbreaking essay made a number of important advancements. The first one was the essay’s “methodological and theoretical problematic” (Gray, 1999, p. 26). Hall was attempting to disrupt and problematize mainstream, positivistic approaches to media content and audience understanding, which presupposed a “transmission” model of communication. Instead, his model complicated the notion of a simple transmission of information when an audience member receives a mediated message. The second innovation, in Hall’s own words, was essentially “political”—he argued that it was impossible for a third-party researcher to effectively determine what the ultimate meaning understood by the audience was by the application of systematic measurement techniques (this was most likely aimed specifically at critical Marxists who ascribed to the textual determinist school of thinking). Instead, Hall “insists that meaning is multi-layered/multi-referential and as such imports the then new fields semiotics and structuralism into the study of mass communication” (Gray, 1999, p. 27).

BOX 6.1

Encoding/ Decoding in Action: Reporting and Understanding News About Rape on Campus

How might social factors shape both the encoding and decoding of media messages? This was the central question posed by Worthington (2008) in her study of news about campus sexual assault and rape. A recent review of published peer-reviewed studies, reports, dissertations, and other crime statistics between 2000 and 2015 discovered that a substantial number of women are the victims of “completed forcible rape, incapacitated rape, unwanted sexual contact and sexual coercion on college campuses” (Fedina, Holmes, & Backes, 2018). Another recent nationwide survey discovered that 81% of women and 43% of men had reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment or assault in their lifetimes (Kearl, 2018). Nancy Worthington wondered what types of impacts news reports on sexual assault might have on audiences’ understanding about these cases and how these reports might affect the likelihood that victims of sexual assault would report their cases to law enforcement.

For her research, Worthington focused on the reporting of a campus sexual assault at a college in the western United States. She examined a 9-minute investigative piece that aired on a local news program on November 19, 2002. Thanks to training that journalists at this local TV station had received about progressive techniques for reporting sexual assault, they incorporated a number of strategies for presenting information about this case:

- (1) Story selection that reflects the types of crimes that occur (i.e., attention to assaults perpetrated by acquaintances),
- (2) avoidance of sexist

- (3) attention to the role of social structures such as law, gender, race, and class in causing and normalizing gender violence, and
- (4) the inclusion of perspectives of victims and/or their advocates. (Worthington, 2008, p. 345)

Worthington began by analyzing the 9-minute news story itself, looking for dominant themes. She found that the story was built around several key elements: concern with violent crime and inadequate punishment, an institutional scandal at the college where the assault took place, and the subsequent cover-up by the college’s administration.

Stuart Hall’s model envisions cultural codes that structure both the production of the message (*encoding*) as well as the audience’s interpretation of the message (*decoding*). While most scholars using Hall’s framework tend to ignore encoding processes or achieve this via textual analysis, Worthington conducted interviews with the news story’s producer and her central source for the story, the former director of the college’s women’s resource center. There were several important forces that shaped the encoding of the news story about this campus sexual assault. First, the central source for the story was keen to “convey the injustices done to women who had been raped on campus,” and this motivation powerfully shaped the tone of the reporting. The fact that the college administration resisted requests for interviews or comments about the case, ultimately assigning a new administrator who had no direct knowledge, also shaped the

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orientation of the resulting news story. The journalist was careful, however, to adhere to a traditional “news narrative” that focused more on the perceived misdeeds of the college administration in these cases rather than delving into the broader broken system of justice that prevails on college campuses when dealing with sexual assault. Worthington also found that the news station pursued its own institutional priorities and self-preservation by, for instance, deciding against running video footage of a college dean running away from a station reporter asking for comment out of concern by the station’s legal department that the station might be sued by the college, which had a somewhat litigious reputation. Each of these forces powerfully shaped the encoding of the final news story.

How did news audiences interpret this story of campus sexual assault? To understand this, Worthington relied on printouts of audience responses from the television station’s website the morning after the story aired. She found that a number of the respondents on the website made the “dominant or preferred” reading that the perpetrators of sexual assault are inadequately punished. One commented: “Letting the rapists off the hook is absolutely unconscionable—not only for the fact that their victims fail to receive any justice but that this is often a pattern of behavior which repeats itself.” Worthington notes that this kind of dominant reading can illustrate “how progressive rape discourse in news can empower assault survivors to challenge patriarchal rape discourse” (p. 359). Some viewers posting comments created complex links between this specific case and other relevant national news stories, such as the sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church. These audiences added their own interpretive elements to the news story and

thereby “raised concerns about the structural nature of institutional power that transcended the story’s strict adherence to narrative” (p. 360).

How about negotiated or oppositional readings to this news story? Worthington discovered evidence of those in the web comments as well. Several viewers’ comments on the website essentially reproduced commonsense patriarchal discourses about female sexual assault victims, for example, by urging female students to “be careful and keep safe” when walking around campus. Another urged women to select their friends more carefully in order to avoid unsavory men who might engage in sexual violence. These alternative readings essentially amounted to a form of “victim-blaming” that the news story encoding was careful to avoid. Worthington points out that these counternarratives also tended to buy into the myth that women are at greatest risk of sexual assault from strangers, when in reality gender violence occurs overwhelmingly between acquaintances.

Worthington’s study is a noteworthy example of Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model for a number of reasons. First, through empirical data, she carefully explicated some of the encoding strategies that shape a media message. Second, her analysis of viewer responses to the news story, while based upon a convenience sample of viewers commenting on the TV station website, illustrates the dominant, negotiated, and oppositional reading strategies that audiences employ in their interpretations of media. While oppositional readings are often imagined by scholars as emancipatory, in this case the progressive reporting of campus rape by the local TV station was thwarted by some viewers’ oppositional readings—readings that worked to uphold the patriarchal status quo that blames sexual assault on the victims.

Source: Based on Worthington, N. (2008). “Encoding and Decoding Rape News: How Progressive Reporting Inverts Textual Orientations.” *Women’s Studies in Communication*, 31(3), 344–367.

The Nationwide Audience Studies

The impact of Hall's "Encoding/Decoding" essay on the development of reader-oriented audience studies beginning in the late 1970s is difficult to overstate. Hall mapped out the theoretical territory for audience researchers but stopped short of matching up his ideas about textual decoding with observable audience data. That task was left to a number of other scholars, some of whom were active in the Birmingham group with Hall. The most well-known and influential audience study to attempt to explore Hall's ideas about audience decoding in an empirical setting was *The Nationwide Audience*, authored by sociologist and CCCS colleague David Morley (1980). The "Nationwide study," as it is more commonly known among communication scholars, documented audience responses to *Nationwide*, a weekly show produced by the BBC. *Nationwide* was a news and public affairs program that was broadcast throughout Britain, and it was one of the more heavily watched TV news broadcasts at the time. The style and format of the program were similar to other weekly TV news magazine programs in the United States such as CBS's *60 Minutes*, *Dateline NBC*, and ABC's *20/20* in that the hour-long program covered a number of topics in some depth.

Morley's 1980 book was actually the second installment of a larger research project. The first part of the series was a systematic analysis of the text of *Nationwide*, which explored the kinds of stories featured most often on the program and the show's orientations toward public policy initiatives (Brunsdon & Morley, 1978). Both Brunsdon and Morley were interested in the kinds of ideological themes that emerged in the program. They focused specifically on how particular solutions were suggested for Britain's social and economic problems. *Nationwide* was known for speaking in "commonsense" language to its audience about complex social and economic problems, with an emphasis on consensus and shared identity. The importance of common sense harkens back to notions of ideology. How was *Nationwide*'s attempt to stake out a notion of national consensus interpreted by the program's audience, many of whom might have goals that conflict and compete with some of the nation's most pressing social issues? How did the reception of some of the "commonsense" solutions offered differ between Britain's executive class and working class, for instance?

The second part of the project, and the one most remembered by scholars today, was a study of the *Nationwide* audience. The concept behind this portion of Morley's research was a direct outgrowth of Hall's essay on audience decoding. Like Hall, Morley theorized that viewers of the program would adopt one of three interpretive positions: a dominant, negotiated, or oppositional reading of the program. But who was more likely to make these readings? To answer this question, Morley turned to the work of sociologist Frank Parkin (1971), who argued that class position—which included income, type of employment, and educational level—played a profound role in shaping individuals' meaning systems, ways of culture, and views about politics and public affairs. Morley recruited individuals who were already engaged in education or training at local universities and

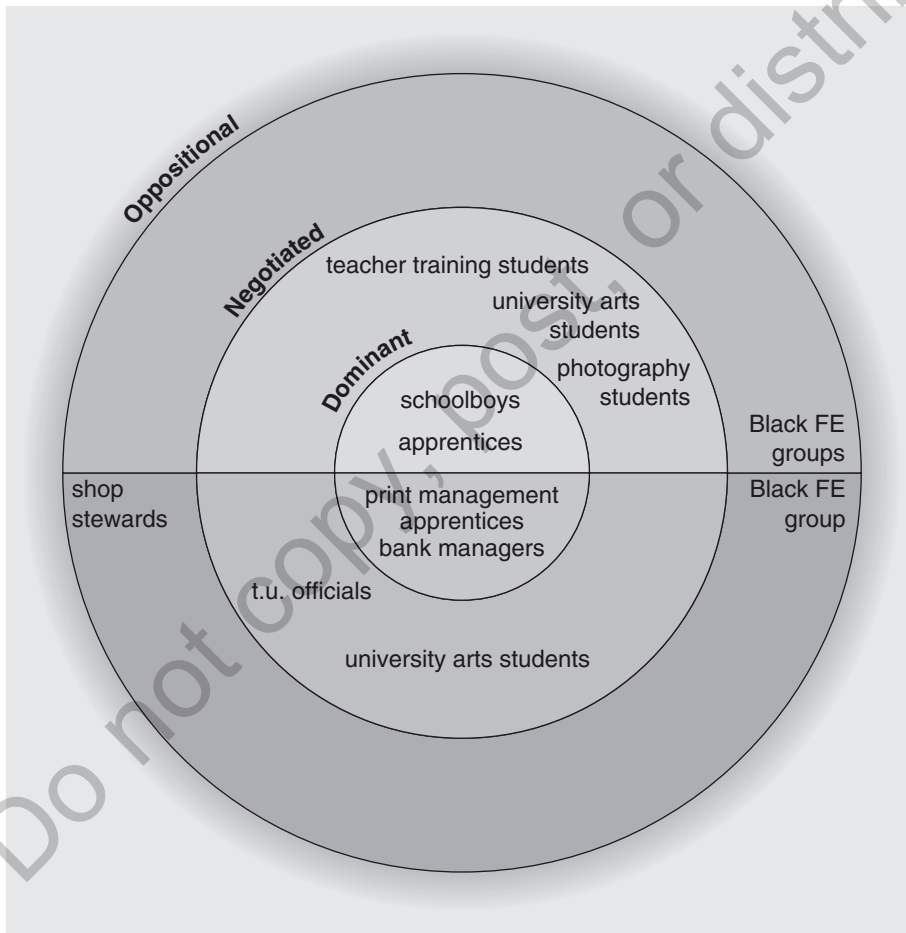
divided them by their occupational status or trajectory. He created four groups: managers, students, apprentices, or trade unionists.

To make sure that the respondents were interpreting the same textual material, Morley selected two specific episodes of *Nationwide* to show to groups of audiences that he had recruited. The first episode, from May 1976, consisted of a report from the British Midlands, a short interview with consumer advocate Ralph Nader, and an interview with a man who was released from jail after being wrongly convicted of murder (Morley & Brunson, 1999, pp. 64–66). The second program was an episode from March 1977, which featured a report about the impacts of the annual budget on three individual families. Morley concentrated specifically on studying group interpretations of the program due to concern that interviews with individual viewers would be “flawed by a focus on individuals as social atoms divorced from their social context” (Morley, 1980, p. 33). In total, 29 small groups of 2–13 people from different social, economic, and educational backgrounds were recruited. Each group watched the program, then participated in a follow-up half-hour open discussion. Morley or other members of his team served as moderators. During these sessions, Morley paid special attention to the types of comments and conversations that were occurring, and he attempted to track down patterns in the viewers’ responses to the program and to investigate whether or not these interpretations mapped onto the occupational categories that he had constructed.

Morley found some distinct patterns among the different occupational groups he assembled. His groups of print and bank management trainees, along with apprentices, tended to be more politically conservative in their views. These individuals generally operated within the dominant code of the *Nationwide* program (see Figure 6.6). The schoolboys (aged 14–16) tended to make dominant readings not because of any well-developed political orientation but because they found the program to be easy to understand and they had little preexisting knowledge about the topics under discussion. Teacher training groups and university arts students tended to make negotiated readings—they criticized the unsophisticated type of news offered by the program, but they did not necessarily counterargue many of the claims made. Morley discovered some distinctly oppositional decoding strategies among trade union rank-and-file members (“shop stewards”), particularly in the episode that dealt with the budget crisis. The shop stewards interpreted the program from a position of working-class consciousness. They noted that the *Nationwide* program failed to address issues from the standpoint of working-class Brits (many found the program much too sympathetic to middle management). The type of oppositional readings offered by the Black further education (FE) students differed markedly from those of the trade unionists in the sense that these students found virtually nothing redeeming about the program whatsoever. These college students “showed little interest in the text and found it extremely hard to recognize anything of themselves in the *Nationwide* image—not so much rejecting the program’s preferred view of the world as refusing to read the message at all” (Moores, 1993, p. 21).

Morley's study was a turning point in audience reception studies for two reasons. First, his was the first study to look empirically and systematically at audience interpretations of television. Secondly, the study took on Hall's notion that audiences are capable of producing their own meanings from media texts outside of the structures of those texts. These interpretations are inevitably shaped by the individual's social position. It's important to note here that Morley was not simply arguing that class position and occupational status were the only factors that shaped audiences' decoding strategies. However, his use of class position as the

Figure 6.6 Audience Decodings of *Nationwide*



Source: Adapted from Morley, D., & Brunson, C. (1999). *The Nationwide Television Studies* (p. 259). London, England: Routledge. Redrawn by Stephanie Plumeri Ertz.

organizing principle of the discussion groups certainly led to this impression, and his work came under fire from critics for this oversimplification of the decoding process. When one looks at the responses of the apprentices, trade union/shop steward groups, and the Black student groups, it is clear that a number of different reading strategies can be in play even within the same class position. Nevertheless, Morley's work was seminal in its attempt to put Hall's theories of decoding into practice with real audiences, and it set the stage for more audience reception work in the 1980s and beyond.

Gender and Media Interpretation: Soap Operas, Romances, and Feminism

Despite some of the perceived shortcomings of Morley's approach to media decoding, his qualitative interview approach was groundbreaking. Morley's finding that Black students did not even engage with the *Nationwide* program because they did not perceive any connection to their own experience points to the possibility that social factors such as race and gender may play an important role in shaping an individual's interpretation of media texts. Seeking to redress earlier biases against forms of media that were popular with women, scholars in the wake of the *Nationwide* studies began to closely examine female audiences of soap operas, romance novels, and women's magazines, among other media texts. Did gender profoundly shape the decodings of these texts? Moreover, were there specifically *feminine* texts that spoke differently to women than to men?

Crossroads and the Soap Opera Viewer

In a nod to Herta Herzog's uses and gratifications studies of female radio serial listeners in the 1940s (see Chapter 6), scholars in the early 1980s returned to the genre of soap operas as a means to explore the interactions between the formal structures of popular media texts and the audiences' interpretations of this content. In particular, many of these scholars wished to understand why soap operas remained so popular with women audiences: What were they getting out of these soaps and how were they interpreting them? The focus of some of this seminal work on soap operas in the early 1980s was the popular British TV daytime serial *Crossroads*. The program, which debuted in 1964 and enjoyed a sizable audience through the 1980s, revolved around the lives of a group of working-class characters who were employed in a motel.

A number of scholars began looking closely at daytime soap operas like *Crossroads* to try to understand why they were popular with women. In an early but influential essay, Charlotte Brunson (who had earlier worked with Morley on the *Nationwide* project) closely examined the text of *Crossroads* and noticed that, like other soap operas, the program was broken down into small

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A number of scholars began looking closely at daytime soap operas like *Crossroads* to try to understand why they were popular with women. In an early but influential essay, Charlotte Brunson (who had earlier worked with Morley on the *Nationwide* project) closely examined the text of *Crossroads* and noticed that, like other soap operas, the program was broken down into small

segments that featured interactions between characters. She noted that this soap opera world “is temporally and spatially fragmented, and that this fragmentation, accompanied by repetitious spatial orientation, foregrounds that dialogue of emotional and moral dilemma which makes up the action” (Brunsdon, 1981, p. 35). Moreover, she argued that the text of *Crossroads* required viewers to possess certain types of competencies in order to fully enjoy the program. This prerequisite knowledge included familiarity with the soap opera genre (generic knowledge), knowledge of specific characters and their histories (serial-specific knowledge), and knowledge of “the socially acceptable codes and conventions for the conduct of personal life (cultural knowledge)” (1981, p. 36). Because of *Crossroads*’ emphasis on conversation, character development, and the intricacies of marriage, romance, and family life, Brudson argued that the program “textually implies a feminine viewer.” She suggested that this textual structure is the chief form of pleasure for female viewers.

Intrigued by the notion of gender-specific programming and interpretive styles, other scholars began looking closely at the soap opera genre and how it was interpreted by female viewers. Dorothy Hobson (1982) conducted the first large-scale study of *Crossroads* audiences. Hobson had been a student at the Birmingham School along with David Morley and Charlotte Brunsdon, and she carried with her the same critical approach to social power and audience reception as was found in her peers’ work on the *Nationwide* program. Unlike Morley, however, who gathered groups of viewers together in an artificial setting to show them specific episodes of *Nationwide*, Hobson went to the homes of a number of different women to watch episodes of *Crossroads* with them in order to more easily open up discussion with them about the program and to observe their television viewing in their “natural” domestic contexts. She found that many women squeezed their soap opera viewing time into small openings in their otherwise hectic daily schedules—feeding children, preparing tea, and “half-watching” the program by listening to the dialogue even when their backs were turned to the television. Hobson was keen to point out that television viewing was an integral part of these women’s everyday activities and that it rarely if ever occurred in isolation from a host of other household and domestic activities. The hectic environment in which these women enjoyed *Crossroads* seemed to challenge the notion that media reception could be accurately understood without studying the physical and social contexts in which viewing occurred (see Chapter 8). Finally, Hobson found that some of her respondents were “guilty and apologetic” about watching the soap opera and “they excuse themselves for liking something which is treated in such a derogatory way by critics and sometimes by their own husbands” (1982, p. 110). The fact that these women felt that their viewing choices were devalued by the mainstream of society set up an interesting challenge for audience reception scholars: How should the gender politics in popular texts and their reception be understood? Did these women respond to the soap opera genre because they found it to resonate with their own lives or perhaps because it offered an escape from their everyday existence?

Decoding *Dallas*: The Work of Ien Ang

These questions were carried through a number of other important studies of female audience reception and interpretation in the decade following the publication of the *Crossroads* work. Ien Ang (1985), for example, conducted a study of viewers for *Dallas*, one of the most popular American prime-time dramas of the 1980s. The program was distributed worldwide to a huge international audience. Like its counterparts *Dynasty* and *Knots Landing*, *Dallas* followed the story of a wealthy family—in this case, the Ewings, who made their money from the Texas oil business. The drama followed the personal tragedies and intricacies of the family's home life, as well as the business machinations of the two competing sons, J. R. and Bobby. Ang solicited responses from women in Holland via an advertisement in a women's magazine and collected 42 letters from regular Dutch viewers of the program. Her close reading of these letters revealed a perplexing pattern: Many of these Dutch women found the trials and tribulations of the Ewing family to be similar to a great deal of the emotional challenges in their own lives. Ang wondered how a text that was so foreign to these viewers and far removed from their economic status (the Ewings lived a lavish lifestyle) could be so "realistic" and personally relevant. Her conclusion was that these women were focusing less on the *denotative* level of the program (that is, a story about a rich Texas family) and more on the *connotative* level. The women interpreted a type of what Ang termed *emotional realism* into the narrative, which spoke to their everyday roles as wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters (Ang, 1985, pp. 41–43). *Dallas* activated these women's "melodramatic imagination," which served as a focal point for their enjoyment of the text, despite the strained premise of some of the characters' actions and motives in the program.

Reading the Romance Novel Reader: Janice Radway

Ang's interpretation of women *Dallas* viewers' statements raised fascinating yet troubling questions about how scholars should understand and "read in" to viewers' responses about their own interpretive processes. These unanswered queries only multiplied after the initial publication of Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* in 1984. Radway, an English professor at Duke University, was not aware of the previous work on decoding of soap operas that had been done by members of the Birmingham School in the early 1980s. Nevertheless, her book remains a milestone in the research on reception and interpretation of popular media and its connection to social power and feminism. The subjects of Radway's study were a small group of women (predominantly housewives) in a town she called "Smithton" (a pseudonym to hide the real name of the town) who regularly read romance novels. Radway made an initial contact with a key informant at a local bookstore, Dorothy (or "Dot" as she was known), who put the scholar in touch with some of the women who frequented the bookstore and asked for advice on which romance novels were worth reading. With the assistance of Dot, Radway gathered 42 completed questionnaires from regular romance readers. She supplemented this data

with extended interviews with Dot and another longtime patron of Dot's bookstore. In the questionnaires, Radway asked about these women's romance novel reading, including how many books they regularly read and of what types, what romance novels meant to them, and what kinds of stories and characters commanded their attention. It should be noted that Radway's initial impetus was to try to find out why women would choose to read narratives that featured somewhat patriarchal notions of romance since the happiness of the female protagonists in the narratives was largely predicated on their ability to find the appreciation and affection of male characters.

In her analysis of the Smithton women's interpretations of romance novels, Radway found that the most appealing type of narrative was one in which an intelligent and dynamic heroine finds herself in a dilemma (usually at the hand of a cruel or untrustworthy male character) but then achieves resolution and peace at the end of the novel through the influence of a caring, tender, and intelligent man. These women regarded the happy ending as the absolute most important aspect of a romance novel, which "lends credence to the suggestion that romances are valued most for their ability to raise the spirits of the reader" (Radway, 1984, p. 66). Far from making alternative or oppositional readings of romance novels, Radway's respondents seemed to prefer the kind of narrative that many feminists have regarded as objectionable: that the female protagonists are at the mercy of men and must rely on them in order to achieve happiness and fulfillment within the story. Did this mean that these women were blindly complicit in their consumption of a popular text that by design reinforced a regressive notion of gender relations?

Radway argued that this, in fact, was *not* the case because of the active choices that these women made to fit romance novel reading into their busy schedules. She claimed that the stresses of everyday lives as mothers, wives, and homemakers worked to deny these women some of their personal emotional and psychological needs. In choosing to take time out from these responsibilities to read these novels, these women were carving out a critical space for the renewal of their own sense of identity and individuality:

Romance reading, it would seem, at least for Dot and many of her customers, is a strategy with a double purpose. As an activity, it so engages their attention that it enables them to deny their physical presence in an environment associated with responsibilities that are acutely felt and occasionally experienced as too onerous to bear. Reading, in this sense, connotes a free space where they feel liberated from the need to perform duties that they otherwise willingly accept as their own. At the same time, by carefully choosing stories that make them feel particularly happy, they escape figuratively into a fairy tale where a heroine's similar needs are adequately met. As a result, they vicariously attend to their own requirements as independent individuals who require emotional sustenance and solicitude. (Radway, 1984, p. 93)

The rebellion for women in romance novels was not necessarily in the text or in its decoding but in the very act of reading. Although Radway concluded that there were some important benefits of romance novel reading for these women, she was reluctant to go too far in espousing the virtues of these books, given the limiting roles for women within the texts themselves.

The empirical work on female media audiences by Hobson, Radway, and Ang spurred more interest in the intersections between culturally devalued popular media genres (like soap operas and women's magazines) and strategies for decoding among these audiences throughout the 1990s. A study by Hermes (1995), for instance, looked at the kinds of interconnected "repertoires" of knowledge that women built up through their reading of different types of popular women's magazines. A similar study of young teen girls and their interpretations of adolescent magazines such as *Seventeen*, *Young & Modern*, *Sassy*, and *Teen* found that girls between the ages of 13 and 17 looked closely at the content of both articles and advertisements (Currie, 1999). Like Radway with romance novel readers, Currie discovered that many of these young girls internalized ideological messages about femininity and used the messages in their own lives, particularly when it came to fashion choices and advice. These studies demonstrate the tricky dynamic between the autonomy of the audience to interpret the text and the inherent structures within texts that work to narrow these interpretations into a few predefined avenues (for a recent example, see Box 6.2).

BOX 6.2

Selfies and Gender Stereotypes

Audience studies scholars often examine the close interconnections between culture and media decodings. Gender stereotypes and the resulting cultural norms (about who should work outside of the home, styles of dress, and self-representation, etc.) are built into the fabric of our media environment. In early studies of audience interpretations, audience scholars were fascinated by the ways in which women reinterpreted or reworked dominant cultural

expectations about gender to suit their own needs, with varying levels of autonomy. Thanks to social media and other forms of participatory online media today, however, audiences can actively construct their own forms of identity online through their own self-representation. But are audiences using these new forms of self-representation and expression such as blogs, selfies, and Facebook posts to break down traditional gender stereotypes?

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Several scholars investigated this question with regard to men and women's selfies—self-portrait photos taken with a mobile phone—that were posted to the photo-sharing platform Instagram (Döring, Reif, & Poeschl, 2016). First, to identify the dominant stereotypes in photography, the researchers looked to prior research by Goffman (1979) that identified the dominant tropes of female portrayals in advertising. Goffman found, for example, that women are portrayed in a stereotypical way through five specific visual tropes:

1. *Relative size*: Women are depicted as smaller in height and in lower positions than men.
2. *Feminine touch*: Women are typically depicted as using their hands to trace the outlines of an object or to caress its surface.
3. *Function ranking*: Men are depicted in executive roles while women are in supporting or assisting roles.
4. *Ritualization of subordination*: Women are located in lower positions in advertising than men to indicate their relative status, which includes being off-balance, lying down, or canting their heads or bodies.
5. *Licensed withdrawal*: Women appear to withdraw their gaze from the situation by not looking at the camera or by “loss of control” with expansive smiles or hiding behind objects.

Döring and colleagues wanted the answer to these questions: Would these gender stereotypes

found in advertising be replicated in audiences' online selfies? Or would the inherent freedom of social media sites like Instagram provide a forum for users to actively subvert or rework these gender tropes? These questions are similar to those posed by Stuart Hall regarding the degree to which media audiences construct dominant, negotiated, or oppositional interpretations of mainstream media.

To study forms of selfie self-presentation among Instagram users, the researchers selected 500 random selfies for analysis. They found that more selfies by women tended to reproduce the “kissing pout” and “faceless portrayal” whereas the male selfies emphasized muscle presentation. Not only did women tend to reproduce some of Goffman's gender stereotypes in their own selfies, but the selfies in Döring et al.'s sample were even more gender stereotypical than a comparison sample of gender depictions in print advertising. What can we learn from this analysis? First, these results indicate that, despite the fact that young people have enormous leeway to construct and alter their self-presentations via social media, this does not necessarily mean that their self-portraits actively subvert dominant gender norms. To put this in Hall's parlance, sometimes audiences will make dominant or hegemonic interpretations of their own self-presentation. Second, how conscious were these young people of the types of images they were posting online? Although Döring et al.'s analysis was a content analysis, they note that follow-up interviews with the individuals whose selfies were used for the study would help to uncover their own self-concepts of gender and self-presentation.

Source: Döring, N., Reif, A., & Poeschl, S. (2016). How gender-stereotypical are selfies? A content analysis and comparison with magazine adverts. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 55, 955–962.

Cross-Cultural Reception of Popular Media

Given that social roles such as gender and class may be shaping audience interpretation, how do individuals from different cultural backgrounds and parts of the globe decode media texts? A number of studies, going back to the mid-1980s when the American prime-time melodrama *Dallas* was in its heyday, have examined differences in decoding strategies among audiences outside of the United States. Some are cross comparisons of audiences from different countries or cultural/ethnic backgrounds, which highlight the impacts of cultural identity on the interpretation of popular media.

Israeli Viewers of *Dallas*

In one of the first studies of its type, Liebes and Katz (1986, 1993) conducted empirical observations of Israeli viewers of *Dallas*. Interestingly, they included five different cultural subsets within their study: Israeli Arabs, recent Russian immigrants to Israel, first- and second-generation Jewish immigrants from Morocco, Israeli kibbutz members, and groups of second-generation Jews who were living in Los Angeles, California. Liebes and Katz invited a total of over 400 participants (in 66 groups of roughly six persons each) to a central location to watch an episode of *Dallas* and have an in-depth discussion following the program (reproducing the methodology used by Morley in the *Nationwide* studies). The focus on the reception of a popular American television program abroad was motivated by a desire to look for evidence of a transfer of American ideologies of consumerism and leisure to other cultures. Liebes and Katz found that the program led individuals to talk about certain types of issues that were brought up within the narrative, such as family loyalties, notions of ethics and honor, gender roles, and standards for success and wealth. Even within the groups living in Israel, cultural and ethnic differences played a role in the decoding of the program. Among the Israeli Arab and Moroccan Jewish groups, family kinship issues were reported to be the most interesting aspect of the show—these viewers used the program “referentially” by treating it as a kind of documentary that related to issues in their own lives (Liebes & Katz, 1986, p. 153). The Russian Jewish immigrants interpreted the program somewhat more “analytically” by distinguishing between the reality of the narrative (which was regarded as somewhat outsized and fictionalized) and the kinds of issues that were raised by the program, such as the ethics of money and business transactions. The cross-comparative nature and the sheer scope of Liebes and Katz’s work on *Dallas* marked it as a clear milestone for scholars of media reception and interpretation.

Decoding American Soap TV in India

Since the days of *Dallas*, the expansion of cable and satellite media services has dramatically increased the ability of audiences around the globe to see

American-produced television programming. Recent research has continued the tradition of the Israeli *Dallas* study by examining the reception of American media overseas, taking note of the impacts that local cultural traditions play on audiences' interpretations of the text. For instance, the daytime soap opera *The Bold and the Beautiful* is a popular American television program in India. Rogers, Singhal, and Thombre (2004) selected a series of episodes of the program that chronicled the character Tony coming to terms with being infected with the HIV virus. How did Indian audiences interpret this plot line? Forty-two respondents in six different focus groups watched the episodes and then discussed them with a trained moderator. Many of the respondents noted that the female characters on *The Bold and the Beautiful* were particularly assertive, something that was not typically found in Indian society. Regarding the HIV storyline, messages about sexual assertiveness in the text were regarded as undesirable. In the soap narrative, the characters come to accept Tony as an HIV-infected person. However, the respondents in the sample regarded this outcome as impossible in India where there is a strong stigma attached to HIV/AIDS. Perhaps the only aspect of the program that directly impacted the lives of everyday Indians was the fashion worn by the actors in the program, which many respondents regarded as desirable.

A later comparison of American and Indian audiences' interpretations of the television sitcom *Friends* also revealed some subtle differences (Chitnis, Thombre, Rogers, Singhal, & Sengupta, 2006). Although American and Indian viewers both perceived the text of *Friends* to be somewhat transparent (meaning that they could imagine themselves in situations like the ones depicted in the program), some of the cultural experiences and lifestyle found in the program were regarded as strictly American. In particular, the strong role of women in the program and their autonomy in directing romantic and sexual encounters within the narrative were foreign to viewers in the Indian sample. As these studies demonstrate, the degree of cultural proximity assigned to media texts by audiences can play an important role in shaping not just the enjoyment of the text but also the perceived reality of the situations and characters found in those texts.

Race, Ethnicity, and Audience Decoding: Viewers Interpret *The Cosby Show*

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As the previously discussed studies make clear, cultural contexts of nationality, gender, and class can play an important role in how audiences interpret media texts, especially if those texts feature characters and narratives that challenge viewers' self-concepts. In this respect, race and ethnicity emerge as equally important cultural contexts for helping us understand how audiences interpret media content. Perhaps the most important thing to understand about race and media is that mainstream media often are highly skewed when it comes to accurately representing racial and ethnic diversity in society. A 2018 study of 1,100 popular Hollywood films conducted by researchers at the Annenberg School for Communication

at the University of Southern California, for example, found that only about 13% of all films released from 2007 to 2017 contained racially balanced casts (Smith, Choueiti, Pieper, Case, & Choi, 2018). Of the films they examined, roughly 70% of all roles were played by White actors, 12% of roles played by African Americans, 6.2% by Hispanics or Latinos, and 6.3% by Asians. They found that some gains had been made in representation since 2007, but those amounted to only about a 6% increase in minority representation in popular films. Consequently, when audiences of color survey the media landscape, they are first confronted with a palpable *absence* of diversity. Secondly, when minorities do appear in the media, they are often relegated to secondary or minor characters, and many of those characters are villains or antagonists. A comprehensive 20-year content analysis of the most popular American television shows from 1987 to 2009, for example, found that Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans were severely underrepresented and that these minority groups were depicted on-screen in highly stereotypical ways, which only served to strengthen racial attitudes of White audiences (Tukachinsky, Mastro, & Yarchi, 2015).

How do audiences navigate these inequalities in media? How might these television viewer's own racial identity and life experiences shape their decoding of popular media texts? In their book *Enlightened Racism*, scholars Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis (1992) set out to examine how audiences from different racial backgrounds might interpret a popular television text. They conducted 52 different focus group discussions with White, African American, and Latino/a viewers from Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1990. Each group watched an episode of the hit 1980s American situation comedy, *The Cosby Show*. The show, which followed the fictional exploits of the Huxtable family, was groundbreaking when it first appeared on American television in 1984 because it was one of the most-watched programs in history to feature a mostly all-Black cast. Additionally, in contrast to earlier depictions of African Americans as poor and uneducated, the show's main characters, Cliff and Clair Huxtable, were upwardly mobile: Cliff was a successful gynecologist and Clair was a corporate lawyer. The show was hugely popular in the United States, demonstrating that a program featuring Black actors could have a mass appeal.

Jhally and Lewis asked their focus group respondents a series of open-ended questions about the show. What did they think of the Huxtable family or the situations that were depicted in the show? What surprised the researchers initially was how much the respondents seemed to blur the distinctions between this TV family and their own social reality. They write that "many viewers were too engaged with the situations and the characters on television that they naturally read beyond the scene or program they were discussing and speculated about them as real events and characters" (Jhally & Lewis, 1992, p. 19). In fact, among the focus groups with White viewers, the researchers found that these viewers spoke mainly about the family situations and the comedy in the episode, and they did not mention the notion of race until directly questioned about it. When asked, these viewers stated that they felt that Black families in America could obtain the same kind

of wealth and social status as the Huxtable family. Indeed, they felt that the TV Huxtable family was evidence of equality of opportunity in the United States. This is a strong indicator that these respondents were engaged in a dominant or hegemonic reading of the *Cosby* text.

How did African-American viewers interpret *Cosby*? Jhally and Lewis found that African-American respondents were acutely aware of racial stereotypes in the mainstream media and were correspondingly pleased and proud that *The Cosby Show* worked to counter those narratives by featuring an upper-middle-class, professional Black family. Yet while these viewers acknowledged the negative media stereotypes of Black Americans, they insisted at the same time that they knew families just like the Huxtables. Jhally and Lewis argue that this type of interpretation among Black audiences suggests that they were willing to accept the “unreality” of the *Cosbys* as a means of escaping racial stereotypes on prime-time television. Indeed, the need for positive Black images on American television is so strong, they argue, that African-American viewers may begin to believe that the world created by the *Cosbys* is real. This seemingly contradictory response—critiquing images of African Americans in the media while simultaneously holding on to the premise that the *Cosbys* represent an authentic view of economic attainment in the United States—suggests a *negotiated* approach among these audiences to *The Cosby Show*. In their conclusion, Jhally and Lewis worry that African-American audiences’ need to accept the fictional *Cosbys* as a realistic reflection of minority life in 1990s America would instill in them the notion that such economic attainment is possible without governmental policies such as affirmative action. If African-American viewers struggle to attain the same high standard of living that they see on *The Cosby Show*, the researchers argue, they may hold themselves largely accountable for that failure rather than work to reform a society where race remains a major factor in social and economic inequality.

Open Texts and Popular Meanings

The question of how different social groupings (such as age, gender, and race) might affect the decoding of popular media was only one of the lingering uncertainties that emerged from Morley’s *Nationwide* study. Another query that arose from Morley’s work was who exactly was determining the difference between a dominant, negotiated, and oppositional decoding of popular television—the individuals under investigation or the researcher himself? In other words, what role does the researcher play in actually *creating* the very changes or trends that he sees in the observational data (Hartley, 1987)? This degree of unintended influence of the observer on research subjects, often simply due to the presence of an outsider among the observed community, is a long-standing concern for empirical social scientists. What if the decoding categories used by Hall and Morley were simply academic inventions that did not adequately reflect how audiences perceived their own interpretations of media texts? The research situation complicated this

question because Morley brought his participants into a different setting (not the home environment where they are used to watching television), selected particular episodes for them to view, and held an in-depth discussion of the program afterward. The somewhat-artificial nature of the research setting caused some scholars to question whether audiences were giving “natural” responses to questions about their interpretations of *Nationwide*.

Open Texts: The Theories of John Fiske

These critiques of the encoding/decoding model were pushed further by John Fiske (1987, 1989), who advocated for an expansion of the theoretical role of the audience in the decoding process. For Fiske, the distinction between the text and the audience made by Hall’s model was an artificial one. In fact, he argued, “There is no text, there is no audience, there are only the processes of viewing—that variety of cultural activities that take place in front of the screen which constitute the object of study” (Fiske, 1989, p. 57). The categories of text and audience should be dissolved, in essence, because without the interpretive intervention of the audience, media texts do not have existence or meaning. Texts, therefore, have fluid boundaries that are defined only by the specific audiences who create them in the process of consuming media. This takes the locus of interpretive power away from the media text itself and situates it firmly in the hands of the audience.

In his 1987 book *Television Culture*, Fiske argued that television was an “open” text due to its many gaps in narrative structure and lack of flow. The continual interruption of the serial program format and commercial breaks invites the audience to seal those gaps through their own interpretive processes (1987, p. 147). Not only was television an open text, but it was also a **polysemic text**, which means that the structure of the narrative and its presentation allow for a multitude of interpretations by different audiences. Fiske characterizes television as a “producerly” text because it “relies upon discursive competencies that the viewer already possesses, but requires that they are used in a self-interested, productive way” (1987, p. 95). Television texts become “activated” whenever audiences receive and interpret them and begin the creative process of associating meanings with the information on the screen. This creative process is pleasurable for the audience and serves as the source of television’s enduring popularity. In fact, writes Fiske, the unfinished form of television itself invites the participation of the audience in completing the picture. Unlike a book, which can be read from beginning to end in a single sitting (if desired), the serial nature of television series (once per week or per day) is a continual interruption of the narrative. These breaks invite the audience to imagine what will happen in the future or to speculate about what happens to characters who are not currently on the screen. Additionally, television texts are full of what Fiske terms “semiotic excess”—cues in the message that allow viewers to construct multiple meanings, even oppositional, contrary meanings. Textual elements such as irony, jokes, contradictions, and metaphors allow for viewers to draw many of their own conclusions from the television narrative.

Intertextuality and Interpretive Communities

Another key aspect of the reception process, according to Fiske (1987), was that audiences inevitably draw outside experiences, influences, and their knowledge of other media texts into their interpretation of television. Media texts do not exist in isolation from one another, particularly in our modern era when television, the Internet, and radio are converging into one digital content stream. Audiences naturally relate texts to their own personal experiences, which includes past experiences with other media. This process of connecting our media experiences together is called **intertextuality** and can be defined as “the fundamental and inescapable interdependence of all textual meaning upon the structures of meaning proposed by other texts” (Gray, 2006, pp. 3–4). Gray’s definition underscores the fact that audiences never interpret media in complete isolation from other texts. Instead, we create meanings out of our media universe by relating specific messages to others that we have seen or heard. This not only adds some greater context to the individual text in question, but it also results in a unique creative act on the part of reader/viewer. Quite often, linking the text that you are interpreting with other content or information is one of the primary pleasures derived from consuming popular texts.

The process of web surfing on the Internet demonstrates how intertextuality works in practice. On any given webpage you may be viewing, you will find hyperlinks that may direct your browser into more specific information on that topic, event, or individual. While on that new webpage, you may find more hyperlinks to more information, and pretty soon, you may be far afield from the original page that you were viewing. Similarly, while watching the latest episode of the reality TV competition series *America’s Next Top Model*, you may talk with a friend about an article about Tyra Banks (the supermodel and host of the program) that you read in a gossip magazine. You might also look for some similarities in the kinds of advice Banks offers the would-be model contestants and dishes out on her daily talk show, *The Tyra Banks Show*. This kind of intertextuality is not limited just to popular films and television shows, and it is certainly not new. In fact, book audiences have been using intertextuality for centuries. As you might imagine, important foundational religious texts like the Bible, the Talmud, and the Koran are some of the most referenced texts in human societies. English playwright William Shakespeare, for example, often referenced the Bible and other important texts of Western civilization in his plays. These mentions can even be tracked in quite sophisticated ways using a Shakespeare concordance, which is essentially a large dictionary of terms and phrases found in Shakespeare’s works, cross-referenced with the original source. References to Shakespeare’s own original characters and plots are also found in numerous places throughout Western literature and popular culture, continuing the cycle of intertextuality. More recent incarnations of intertextual wizardry involve the selection of different aspects of popular music and “remixing” them into new creative songs that are often posted on the Internet (see Chapter 9).

Over time, certain interpretations of texts can become more permanent and consistent among audiences. Despite the “openness” of texts, groups of viewers or readers may begin to construct similar meanings based on mutual shared interests or demographic similarity (like Morley’s *Nationwide* groups, for instance), social pressures, or past experiences. In this case, viewers may form what English scholar Stanley Fish (1980) called an **interpretive community**. Like Fiske, Fish proposed that authors and texts themselves exist only insofar as they are experienced by readers, such that “the reader’s response is not *to* the meaning; it *is* the meaning” (emphasis in original; 1980, p. 3). This means that different groups of readers or audiences will develop interpretations that coincide with their interests and experiences with a text or collection of texts. For example, literary or media critics will sometimes come to interpretive conclusions about a text that will conflict with those of casual audiences or fans of that text. Fish emphasizes that these interpretive strategies “exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around” (1980, p. 171). This formulation places the power of defining and, indeed, of *creating* meaning out of the formal properties of texts firmly in the hands of readers and viewers. Just as interpretations of texts can shift, so too can interpretive communities because they are

not natural or universal, but learned. . . . The only stability, then, inheres in the fact (at least in [Fish’s] model) that interpretive strategies are always being deployed, and this means that communication is a much more chancy affair than we are accustomed to think of it. (Fish, 1980, p. 172)

In other words, interpretive communities come into being only through the actions of their members and are subject to shifts over time. One of the more interesting recent investigations of complex interactions between popular texts and interpretive communities is Jonathan Gray’s work on the hit Fox animated series *The Simpsons* (see Box 6.3).

BOX 6.3

D’oh! Parody, Irony, and Audiences for *The Simpsons*

Fox Television’s animated family comedy *The Simpsons* premiered as a regular series on American screens in January 1990 and is currently the longest-running prime-time television series in U.S. history (Hudson, 2009). The program

follows the exploits of the Simpson family in the fictional town of Springfield, USA (the state is unknown), but its cultural resonance has been felt worldwide. One of the most interesting and thorough recent analyses of the interpretive

interactions between texts and readers is Jonathan Gray's 2006 book, *Watching With the Simpsons*.

Gray writes that not only is the show popular around the globe, but it has also ushered in a new type of "ironically distanced and distancing humor" as a narrative style (Gray, 2006, p. 6). The show parodies current political, social, and religious debates while casting an ironic gaze on the media itself, making the program a densely layered and highly intertextual text. Gray writes:

Much of its humor is deeply transitive, pointing outside the borders of *The Simpsons* to all manner of other genres, texts, and discourses. To laugh at these jokes is frequently to read those other genres, texts, and discourses as much as it is to read *The Simpsons*. (2006, p. 10)

The critical and popular success of *The Simpsons* owes much to this complex interplay of textual knowledge, inviting viewers to appreciate multiple levels of humor depending upon the initial level of awareness of popular culture, television, current events, and the history of the series itself. What do such regular viewers make of the program?

In 2001 and 2002, Gray interviewed 35 regular *Simpsons* viewers who lived in the central London area. Gray's respondents ranged in age from 22 to 38 years old. The average age was 27, which reflects the somewhat younger age demographic for the program as a whole (Gray, 2006, p. 120). Gray asked viewers about their favorite or least favorite characters on the program,

what they thought about the quality of the show (whether it was getting better or worse), what was funny about *The Simpsons*, and whether the show has any particular "politics" or point of view, among other things.

He found that *The Simpsons* was the kind of program that brought people together and formed an initial social bond of mutual interest and appreciation of the show's wry, ironic humor and deft parody of celebrities and modern popular media. Viewers who watched the show together found that it served as a tool to connect to others through *Simpsons*-related conversation. Some who did not watch the show regularly even found themselves somewhat cut off from their friends who did. How did these viewers interpret the show's relentless parody and ironic take on the media, celebrities, and current events? Many of Gray's respondents described the program as "clever" or "witty" or even "smart but funny," noting that the show's humor works on a surface level as well as on a deeper level of social commentary and satire. Viewers noted that *The Simpsons* often took critical aim at big issues such as capitalism, consumerism, the television industry (even the show's parent, the Fox TV network), suburban life, and the notion of TV sitcoms themselves. As one respondent put it, "Everyone and everything is fair game. Including themselves" (Gray, 2006, p. 147). Ultimately, these viewers found the intertextuality of *The Simpsons* to be a prime source of interpretive pleasure. However, Gray warns that the end result of the program's relentless parody may be a cynical detachment from the types of social problems and human foibles that are so mercilessly parodied in every episode.

Source: Gray, J. (2006). *Watching With The Simpsons: Television: Parody, and Intertextuality*. London, England: Routledge.

Revisiting Encoding/ Decoding in the 21st Century

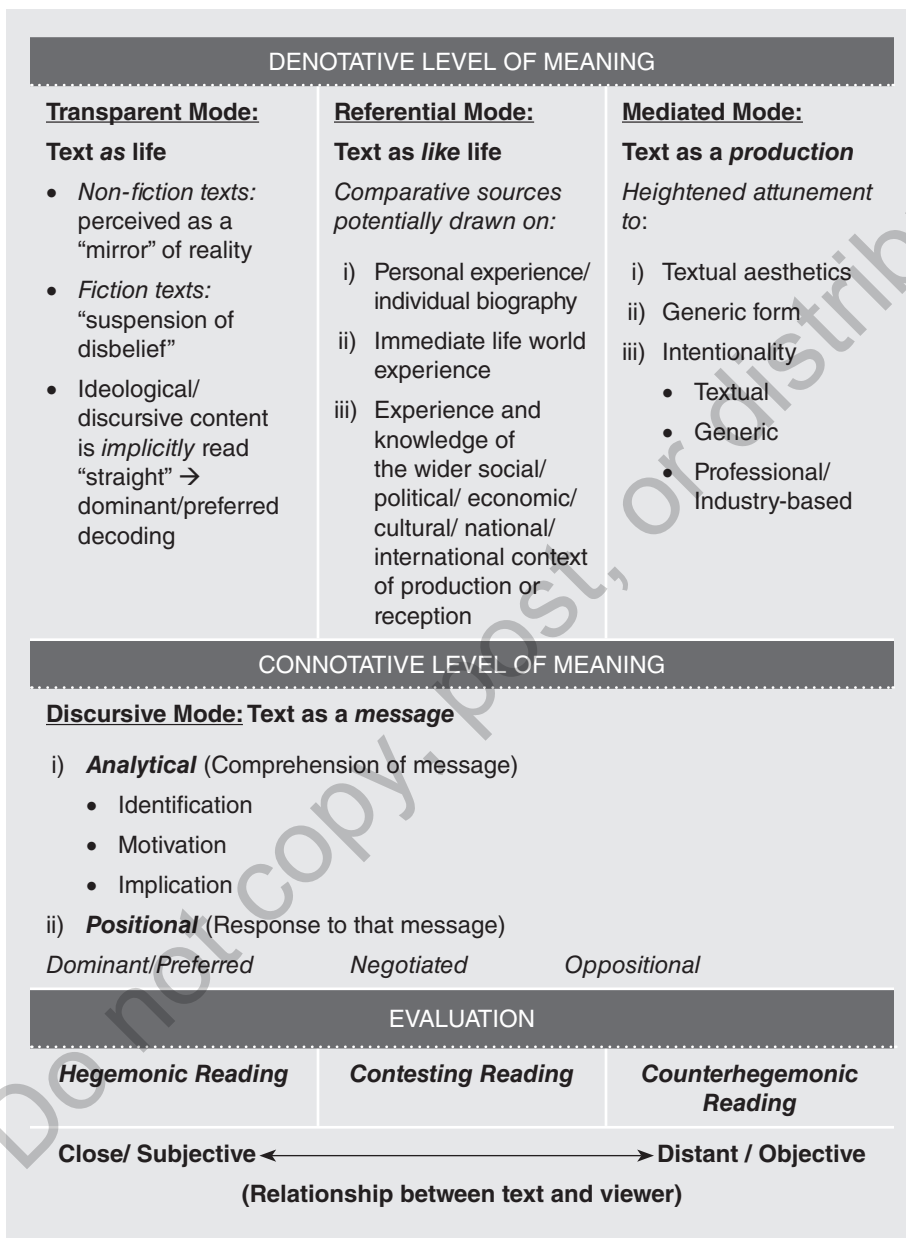
The classical theories of audience interpretation outlined in this chapter were conceived in a pre-Internet era. It's clear that the arrival of the Internet in the 1990s and the explosion of user-generated content via blogs, YouTube, and social media has radically reoriented the media landscape (which will be the central focus of Chapter 10). A media environment that was once dominated by industrialized, formalized systems of production and distribution has now expanded and diversified to incorporate a rising tide of mediated content, much of which is generated by individual media users (the erstwhile "audience"). Stuart Hall and a number of his contemporaries sought to decenter the role of the text as a dominating force in meaning production by highlighting audiences' abilities to sometimes reinscribe or reimagine the meaning of the text. For Hall, the key to unlocking oppositional readings of the text were found in cultural competencies that were linked to socio-demographic categories such as class, race, and gender. Hall's notion of oppositional readings and the realization that texts were "open" (to use Fiske's term) seemed to offer audiences a pathway to liberate themselves from media texts to inscribe meaning into media, thereby completing the "circuit" of communication between the message producer and the audience. Was Hall potentially overstating the power of the audience, however? Several scholars in early 2000s pointed to some potential weaknesses in Hall's model and offered revisions.

Reimagining Audience Decoding: Carolyn Michelle's Modes of Interpretation

One major restructuring of Hall's model was offered by Carolyn Michelle (2007). She argued that the encoding/decoding model essentially conflates two different dimensions of audience interpretation: their understanding of the *form and structure* of a media text and the *content* (and potential ideological meanings) of the text. When respondents in Hall's *Nationwide* study were responding to the program in what Hall identified as an oppositional reading, were they responding to the ideological subtext of the news program (as Hall concluded), or were they reacting critically instead to the formal elements of the program (the denotative aspect of the message), such as the news program's low production values? Michelle argues that, in fact, the kind of counterideological interpretations imagined by Hall are much rarer than scholars might think. By separating audience interpretations of message from its content, Michelle finds that "the only form of critical reading that is seriously capable of resisting or opposing the semantic or ideological content of a text is one which challenges that content directly in terms of its ideological or discursive grounding" (2007, p. 192).

In place of the three interpretive reading strategies outlined by Hall—dominant, negotiated, and oppositional—Michelle proposes four modes of audience engagement with media texts (see Figure 6.7 for a visual of the model). The first three

Figure 6.7 Michelle's (2007) Multidimensional Model of Audience Interpretation



Source: Adapted from Michelle, C. (2007). "Modes of Reception: A Consolidated Analytical Framework." *Communication Review*, 10(3), 181–222.

reception modes are all focused on the denotative level of meaning or the formal and structural elements of the media message (such as the script, the camera angles, the writing, characters, plot, etc.). The first mode of reception is “transparent” and occurs when audiences perceive nonfiction texts as a mirror to reality. For fiction, this occurs when audiences suspend their disbelief to engage directly with the story and characters in a narrative. Michelle notes that this type of interpretation effectively leads to a dominant or preferred reading of the media text that Hall’s model outlines. The second decoding strategy is what Michelle describes as the “referential” mode, wherein audiences connect media texts to their own personal experiences or real-world knowledge. The third reading strategy, called the “mediated” mode, occurs when audiences focus their attention on the aesthetics or form of the text itself, bringing to the fore their awareness of the institutions or structures that guide the production of media messages. So, for example, a film viewer using the mediated reception mode may decide that she is largely unimpressed by actor Tom Cruise’s performance in the hit film *Mission Impossible: Rogue Nation*, but at the same time, she may draw upon her knowledge that Cruise’s production company has bankrolled the film, so there likely was no real choice about who would play the lead male character.

The fourth reception mode shifts from the formal aspects of the text (the denotative level of meaning) and considers the content of the message (the connotative level). Called the “discursive” mode, this occurs when audiences “specifically address the text’s propositional or ‘message’ content—i.e., its ideological connotations” (Michelle, 2007, p. 206). This reading mode is perhaps most similar to the analytical categories originally proposed by Stuart Hall. This reception mode is identified by an “analytical” dimension—whereby viewers “may identify (comprehend) the message that is explicitly articulated within the text, and perhaps analyze it further in terms of its motivations or implications” or by reflecting on “the viewer’s *position* in relation to textual connotations” (Michelle, 2007, p. 208). This reception mode requires that audiences engage directly with the content of the material presented to them and is a prerequisite for kinds of oppositional readings imagined by Hall. The final category of Michelle’s model is called “evaluation.” Once an individual audience member’s response to a text is ascertained via the four criteria, their descriptive responses to those criteria are then evaluated according to whether these interpretations constitute *hegemonic*, *contesting*, or *counterhegemonic* readings. These three evaluative criteria—so central to the encoding/decoding mode—are preserved but are anchored in a more nuanced understanding of audiences’ reaction to media texts at the denotative level.

Let’s take a closer look at how Michelle’s audience interpretation framework can apply to a specific example. Granelli and Zenor (2016) studied audience reactions to the crime drama and mystery television series *Dexter*, which aired on the Showtime cable network from 2006 to 2013. The series centers on the character Dexter Morgan who is a forensic technician specializing in blood splatter analysis for the Miami Metro Police Department. By day, Dexter is employed by the police, but in his off hours, he leads a parallel life as a vigilante serial killer who hunts down and murders individuals who have previously escaped justice. Granelli and Zenor wanted to know this: How do audiences interpret and reconcile the

conflicting norms of morality in this program? To study this question, they evaluated professional and amateur published reviews of the first season of the program and identified 59 specific dominant themes in the responses. Then they recruited 62 respondents from a midsize public university in the U.S. Northeast and asked them to sort these statements into two piles: those they agreed with and those they disagreed with. After the sorting was complete, open-ended interviews with the respondents were conducted to explore the reasoning behind their sorts.

Their results revealed several distinct interpretation modes among *Dexter* viewers. One interpretive scheme, which Granelli and Zenor dubbed “justified vigilante,” perceived the Dexter character to be a hero because he used his impulses for good and not for gratuitous revenge. They identified this interpretive strategy as the “transparent” mode in Michelle’s (2007) framework because these viewers lost themselves in the text and its moral universe. Other respondents approached the program with an alternative interpretation, which focused on the ways in which the program depicted the complexities of human morality. These individuals were working in a “referential” mode of engagement because they had some empathy for the lead character while also noting that their own actions and moral compass were quite different. The third interpretive strategy, dubbed “gratuitous violence” by Granelli and Zenor, was repulsed by Dexter’s violent vigilantism. As one respondent replied, “Do I think killing is wrong and unjust? No matter what? Yes.” These viewers operated in a “discursive” mode because they dealt primarily with the connotative level of meaning and explicitly rejected the program’s premise that violent criminals can have sympathetic qualities. The last interpretive strategy used by the respondents recognized that the program was fictionalized yet enjoyable because it depicted a type of “deviant escapism” found only in popular culture. Because these individuals made clear distinctions between reality and the fantasy environment of the program, they were interpreting the program through a “mediated” form of engagement in Michelle’s (2007) framework. This example demonstrates the degree of nuance that audiences bring to media texts, particularly those that explore complex themes and morally ambiguous protagonists. Granelli and Zenor’s study also revealed that respondents were more likely to center their interpretations on the *form* of the text (the denotative level of meaning) as opposed to the *content* (connotative meaning), consistent with Michelle’s model.

Online, Digital Media, and Audience Decoding

Theories of audience interpretation have historically examined audiences’ reactions to popular media since these texts are both widely available and are based upon the broadcast model: Media messages flow oneway from institutionalized message producers (television, radio, film, etc.) to audiences. Think about our current media environment, much of which is mediated via the Internet. The lines between producers and audiences have been considerably blurred, thanks to a host of user-generated content such as personal websites, blogs, wikis, podcasts, and social media, just to mention a few. Can models of audience interpretation from the 20th century be effectively mapped onto our media experiences in the 21st century?

A number of scholars have argued that, yes, in fact, Hall's encoding/decoding model and the model's careful consideration of the connection between culture and audience interpretations can be valuable for analyzing today's media environment. How might scholars understand something like video games within the context of audience interpretations, for example? Video games scholar Adrienne Shaw (2017) has wrestled with this question, noting that Hall's notion of decoding doesn't necessarily take into account the kind of active engagement with the text that is a basic requirement of digital games. She writes:

Audience activity with digital media does not simply demonstrate the resistive agency of audience members, as in much of digital, contemporary media it is largely a requirement for using these media. A video game, for example, simply cannot function without a measure of activity and involvement beyond that which is required in other media. This makes video games activities as much as they are texts. The interactive properties of the texts, however, do not define the experience of game play. Understanding their reception, thus, must interrogate what actions these texts invite and how players actually use them. (Shaw, 2017, p. 597)

As Shaw makes clear, audiences are increasingly called upon to engage actively with media. She advocates for the use of the concept of *affordances* to help scholars apply encoding/decoding to 21st-century media. Affordances essentially refers both to the structural features of a particular technology, application, or text (its environment), as well as the universe of potential applications for that thing (something that is called "imagined affordances" by Nagy & Neff, 2015). So, for example, a dominant or hegemonic use of a text/technology like video games might involve following the rules and doing what the text/technology imagines. An oppositional use might involve subverting that text/technology by changing the design parameters (by hacking or modding the games, for example) or by employing cheats or other tools to jump ahead of other players. These alterations of the encoding/decoding model could assist scholars in applying Hall's theoretical framework to a range of new, interactive technologies and texts that dominate our media world today.

Conclusion: Interpretation and Audience Power

In this chapter, we have explored the idea of audience interpretation, beginning with the notion that audiences not only select specific media content but also bring to it a range of intellectual competencies that profoundly shape their understandings of media. The 1980s saw a shift in the paradigm for studying audiences away from a transmission model and toward a process model that examined the specific interactions between individual viewers and media texts. Theories of media interpretation that were developed in the 1970s and 1980s rested upon the

foundation of semiotics, or the production and circulation of signs in society. The theories of Althusser were used to reintroduce Marxist concerns with ideology and resistance into the field of media interpretation. The potential for audience liberation from the ideological constraints of mainstream media was the key theoretical antecedent to Stuart Hall's groundbreaking "Encoding/Decoding" essay. Hall's work, in turn, encouraged a new generation of scholars such as David Morley, Charlotte Brunson, Dorothy Hobson, Ien Ang, Carolyn Michelle and Adrienne Shaw (among others) to incorporate qualitative observational and interview methods to explore how viewers actually understood their media environment. While Morley relied heavily on class distinctions as one of the more powerful determinants of audience decoding style, others focused on gender, race, and cultural context key influences in audiences' interpretations of media. Scholars such as John Fiske went even further in questioning the relevance of the text/audience distinction by arguing that media texts themselves exist only insofar as they are created by the interpretive activities of the audience.

One of the critical questions that remained unanswered from Morley's *Nationwide* study was the extent to which the somewhat artificial research setting created by the study itself created the very responses that Morley recorded and analyzed. Could audiences provide their "true" and natural responses to a researcher in a viewing setting that was contrived to produce research results? The same critique could be leveled at Ang's study of *Dallas* viewers and Radway's research on romance novel readers: What role did the reception context *itself* play in the interpretation of media texts? Hobson's *Crossroads* study spearheaded a new direction for reception scholars: to engage audiences and their media consumption in individual, domestic contexts to investigate whether and how reception settings might play a role in textual interpretation. To that end, the next chapter returns to the 1980s to explore the growing interest in social and situational contexts and their role in shaping audience experiences with the media.

DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

1. Select a film or television program of your choice (it could be a fictional program or even a sporting event). Sit down to watch the program and, as you do, keep a running diary of your thoughts and interpretations in a stream-of-consciousness style. Alternatively, you can ask someone else not familiar with the theories in this chapter to do this exercise. Then, once you have completed the freewrite, look back on your response and think about the following questions:
 - What kinds of meanings or interpretations were you making of this program?
 - Were any other texts or experiences talked about in the freewrite? Cite some examples of intertextuality in the response.

- Do you see any evidence of negotiated or oppositional readings in your response? If so, what examples can you cite? If not, think about what might constitute a negotiated or oppositional reading (in Hall's terminology) to the media text you viewed and make some notes about this to share with the class.
2. Select a news program (either an evening newscast or a newsmagazine program such as *20/20*, *Dateline*, or PBS's *Frontline*) and closely examine a particular news story within the program. What issues or problems were addressed in the program? What type of argument, if any, is being made about the possible solution to the issue or how the issue may develop in the future? Make notes on the dominant or ideological messages that you see at either a denotative or connotative level. Next, show your news story to family, to friends, or to classmates and ask them what their responses or reactions are to the program. Do you see any evidence of dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings here?
 3. Watch the video *Representation and the Media*. It is an extended lecture by scholar Stuart Hall and was produced by the Media Education Foundation (<http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?preadd=action&key=409>). Once you have done so, answer the following questions:
 - What kinds of meanings are embedded within popular cultural texts, according to Hall? In what ways are some of Hall's ideas similar to those of screen theory and Louis Althusser?
 - How do language and other "signification practices" work to create and fix meanings of media texts? How is ideology at work here?
 - What is the role of the audience in this process, according to Stuart Hall? Do audiences have the power to combat media stereotypes and make oppositional readings? How might this be accomplished?

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

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