



Television, Texts and Audiences

The development and institutionalization of cultural studies has long been intertwined with that of media studies. In particular, television, the major form of communication in most western societies, is one of cultural studies' prolonged concerns. No other medium can match television for the volume of popular cultural texts it produces and the sheer size of its audiences. – Barker, p. 315

Television is a resource open to virtually everybody in modern industrialized societies and an increasing one in the 'developing' world. It is a source of popular knowledge about the world and increasingly brings us into contact, albeit in a mediated way, with ways of life other than our own.

Television is implicated in 'the provision and the selective construction of social knowledge, of social imagery, through which we perceive the "worlds", the "lived realities" of others, and imaginarily reconstruct their lives and ours into some intelligible "world-of-the-whole"' (Hall, 1977: 140). Though we are currently witnessing the rise of new digital media, television remains the most widely accessible mass media. – Barker, p. 315

Television needs to be understood in terms of:

- ▶ texts (programs)
- ▶ the relationship between texts and audiences (audience research)
- ▶ political economy (organization/industry)
- ▶ patterns of cultural meaning

This argument points to the desirability of a multidimensional and multiperspectival approach to the understanding of television. This is one that would seek to avoid reductionism by grasping the connections between the economic, political, social and cultural dimensions of the medium. – Barker, p. 316

Television as Text: News and Ideology

Television news is not a reflection of reality so much as 'the putting together of reality' (Schlesinger, 1978).

News is not an unmediated 'window-on-the-world' but a selected and constructed representation constitutive of 'reality'. -- Barker, p. 316

The selection of items for inclusion as news and the specific ways in which a story is constructed are never neutral or objective. They are always a particular version of events. News narratives concern explanations for the way things are. They offer us frameworks of understanding and rules of reference about the way the world is constructed. It follows that news selection criteria tell us about the binding and justifying 'world view' that is being assembled and disseminated. – Barker, p. 316

3 Theoretical Models of Television News

The manipulative model

Explanations for how and why the news promotes some world views and not others come in a variety of forms. In the manipulative model, the media are seen as a reflection of a class-dominated society. Here ideology is said to be consciously introduced by media controllers. This happens as a direct result of the concentration of ownership in the hands of people who are part of the 'establishment' or through direct government manipulation and/or informal pressure. There have been examples of direct manipulation of the news. – Barker, p. 318

However, this is too crude a model of the media in the context of western plural democracies because of:

- ▶ the quasi-independence granted to operational controllers and journalists
- ▶ legal constraints placed on news organizations
- ▶ the sophistication of audiences

The pluralist model

Western journalists and news organizations themselves often stress a pluralist model. This argument suggests that market forces lead to a plurality of outlets and to a multiplicity of voices addressing different audiences. Concentration of media ownership does not lead to direct proprietorial control because of the independence of professional staff. What the media pay attention to is determined by audience choice through the mechanisms of the market. Audiences, aware of a range of political views and presentational styles within the media, choose to buy or watch that which they already agree with. – Barker, pp. 318-319

The hegemonic model

Within cultural studies the hegemonic model has been popular. Any given culture is constructed in terms of a multiplicity of streams of meaning. However, it is argued that there is a strand of meanings that can reasonably be called ascendant or dominant (Hall, 1977, 1981; Williams, 1973). The process of making, maintaining and reproducing these authoritative sets of meanings and practices has, after Gramsci (1968), been dubbed cultural hegemony – Barker, p. 319

Within a hegemonic model, ideological processes in news production are not the result of direct intervention by owners or even a conscious attempt at manipulation by journalists. Rather, they are an outcome of the routine attitudes and working practices of staff. News journalists learn the conventions and codes of 'how things should be done'. This involves the reproduction of ideology (or 'justifying world views') as common sense. For example, Hall et al. (1978) argue that reliance on 'authoritative sources' leads to the media reproducing primary definers' accounts as news. Primary definers are taken to be politicians, judges, industrialists, the police, and so forth, that is official agencies involved in the making of news events. In translating the primary definitions of news, the media, as secondary definers, reproduce the hegemonic ideologies associated with the powerful. They also translate them into popular idioms. – Barker, p. 319

Presentational Styles

Television news is constituted not only by its choice of topics and stories but also by its verbal and visual idioms or modes of address. Presentational styles have been subject to a tension between an informational-educational purpose and the need to entertain us.

Current affairs programs are often 'serious' in tone, with adherence to the 'rules' of invited to consider the impact of particular news items from the perspective of the 'average person in the street'. Contemporary political coverage has come to rely on the staged sound-bite, resonant phrase or telling image. – Barker, 321

The Active Audience

No consideration of television would be complete without exploring the evidence provided by audience research. However, empirical evidence never simply 'speaks for itself' in an unambiguous way but is framed within particular theoretical perspectives. The framework that has dominated audience research within the cultural studies tradition has been the 'active audience' paradigm. – Barker, p. 326

The active audience 'tradition' suggests that audiences are not cultural dopes but are active producers of meaning from within their own cultural context. – Barker, p. 326

The audience is conceived of as active and knowledgeable producers of meaning not products of a structured text. – Barker, p. 327

However...

- ▶ Meanings are bounded by the way the text is structured and by the domestic and cultural context of the viewing.
- ▶ Audiences need to be understood in the contexts in which they watch television in terms of both meaning construction and the routines of daily life.
- ▶ Audiences are easily able to distinguish between fiction and reality; indeed they actively play with the boundaries.
- ▶ The processes of meaning construction and the place of television in the routines of daily life alter from culture to culture and in terms of gender and class within the same cultural community.

Encoding-decoding

Though meaning is embedded at each level, it is not necessarily taken up at the next moment in the circuit. In particular, the production of meaning does not ensure consumption of that meaning as the encoders might have intended. This is because television messages, constructed as a sign system with multi-accentuated components, are polysemic. In short, television messages carry multiple meanings and can be interpreted in different ways. This is not to say that all the meanings are equal among themselves. Rather, the text will be 'structured in dominance' leading to a 'preferred meaning', that is, the one to which the text guides us. – Barker, p. 328

The audience is conceived of as socially situated individuals whose readings will be framed by shared cultural meanings and practices. To the degree that audiences share cultural codes with producers/encoders, they will decode messages within the same framework. However, where the audience is situated in different social positions (e.g. of class and gender) with different cultural resources, it is able to decode programmes in alternative ways. – Barker, p. 328

Hall (1981) proposed, after Parkin, a model for three hypothetical decoding positions:

- ▶ *the dominant-hegemonic encoding/decoding* which accepts the 'preferred meanings'
- ▶ *a negotiated code* which acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic in the abstract but makes its own rules and adaptations under particular circumstances
- ▶ *an oppositional code* where people understand the preferred encoding but reject it and decode in contrary ways

Audiences do not merely reproduce textual meaning but *produce new meaning*. The text may structure aspects of meaning by guiding the reader, but it cannot fix meanings, which are the outcome of the oscillations between the text and the imagination of the reader. This argument was popularized within cultural studies by the early work of [David] Morley and [Ien] Ang. – Barker, p. 329

Television Audiences and Cultural Identity

Watching television is constitutive of and constituted by forms of cultural identity. Television is a resource for the construction of cultural identity just as audiences deploy their cultural identities and cultural competencies to decode programs in their own specific ways. As television has become globalized, so the place of television in the constitution of ethnic and national identities has taken on a particular significance (Barker, 1999). – Barker, p. 331

The export of meaning

- ▶ By '*referential*' they mean an understanding that reads the program as if it were referring to 'reality'.
- ▶ By '*critical*' they mean an awareness of the constructed nature of the program

Localizing the global

Television circulates texts and discourses on a global scale. However, its consumption and use as a resource for the construction of cultural identities always take place in a local context. – Barker, p. 332

The Globalization of Television

By globalization is meant a set of processes that are leading to the compression or shrinking of the world, that is, to an ever-increasing abundance of global connections and our understanding of them. The globalization of television involves technology, economics, institutions and culture. – Barker, pp. 334-335

Television may be considered global in respect of:

- ▶ the various configurations of public and commercial television, which are regulated, funded and viewed within the boundaries of nation-states and/or language communities
- ▶ the technology, ownership, program distribution and audiences of television, which operates across the boundaries of nation-states and language communities
- ▶ the circulation by television of similar narrative forms and discourses around the world

The Political Economy of Global Television

Political economy is concerned with the power and the distribution of economic and social resources. For current purposes this translates into:

- ▶ a concern with who owns and controls the production and distribution mechanisms of television
- ▶ the consequences of patterns of ownership and control for the cultural landscape

Global Electronic Culture

In the context of globalization, culture can be seen to span time and place. Thus, cultural artifacts and meanings from different historical periods and geographical places can mix together and be juxtaposed. The values and meaning attached to place remain significant. However, the networks in which people are involved extend far beyond their physical locations. For some critics this involves mixing, matching and cultural exchange; for others it is a form of cultural domination. – Barker, p. 338

Media Imperialism

Schiller (1969, 1985) makes the case that media fit into the world capitalist system by providing ideological support for capitalism, and for transnational corporations in particular. The media are seen as vehicles for corporate marketing, manipulating audiences to deliver them to advertisers. This allied to the assertion of a general ideological effect by which media messages create and reinforce audience attachment to the status quo. – Barker, p. 338

The globalization of television has contributed to the construction of a collage of images from different times and places which has been dubbed postmodern. – Barker, p. 341

Global Postmodern Culture

The postmodern 'figural':

- ▶ puts stress on the visual
- ▶ draws from everyday life
- ▶ contests rationalist views of culture
- ▶ immerses the spectator in his/her desire for the cultural object

Hutcheon argues that postmodernism 'takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement. It is rather like saying something with inverted commas around what is being said' (Hutcheon, 1989: 1). In other words, postmodernism is a form of ironic knowingness. It is ironic because it explores the limitations and conditions of its own knowing. The stylistic markers of the postmodern in television have been seen as:

- ▶ aesthetic self-consciousness/self-reflexiveness
- ▶ juxtaposition/montage/bricolage
- ▶ paradox/ambiguity/uncertainty
- ▶ intertextuality and the blurring of genre boundaries
- ▶ irony, parody and pastiche

Hyperreality and TV Simulations

For Baudrillard, 'hyperreality' is produced according to a model. It is not a given but is artificially reproduced as real. Thus, the prefix 'hyper' signifies 'more real than real': a real retouched in a 'hallucinatory resemblance' with itself. Baudrillard describes a process leading to the collapse of boundaries, which he calls 'implosion', between the media and the social. Here the news and entertainment blur into each other and 'TV is the world'. Thus, television simulates real-life situations, not so much to represent the world as to execute its own. For Baudrillard, postmodern television is flat and one-dimensional, its continual flow of images and simulacra having no connotational hierarchy. It is both literally and metaphorically 'superficial'. – Barker, p. 343

In contrast, for Kellner television is meaningful and does not represent ' a black hole where all meaning and messages are absorbed in the whirlpool' (Kellner, 1992: 156). Rather, he argues for the integrating central role of television as myth and ritual celebrating dominant values and modes of thought and behavior. As such, he suggests that television provides models by which people construct their attitudes, values and consequent actions. – Barker, p. 343

Consumer Culture

Globalization, consumer culture and postmodernism are closely allied phenomena for the following reasons:

- ▶ Globalization has involved the 'displacement' of the west and its philosophical categories from the center of the universe; indeed, some have seen the collapse of western classifications as the marker of postmodernism.
- ▶ The rise in visibility and status of popular culture, hastened by electronic media, has meant that the distinction between high and low culture is no longer viable.
- ▶ The blurring of the boundaries between art, culture and commerce, allied to the rising prominence of the postmodern 'figural', has resulted in a general aestheticization of everyday life (Featherstone, 1991, 1995).