

Audiences, identity and interactivity

COMM2112 Theories of
Communication and Persuasion
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AUDIENCE RECEPTION THEORY

Audience Reception Theory

- The central focus in the study of communication is
 - NOT on the text or message
 - BUT on
 1. The audience, and
 2. Reception of the message
- WHY?
 - Because meaning is **constructed**, not given
 1. not only in the process of **encoding**
 2. but also in the process of **decoding**

Unlike the process/effects tradition

- Little concern with meaning – they assume language has given meaning
- When I communicate....
 - I know what I mean
 - I put it into words or a textual form that we commonly understand
 - You hear/read/see it
 - You know what I mean
 - You get the message
 - You do something with it

What led us to audience reception theory?

- Uses and Gratifications – broke down the homogenous audience
 - Media do not have one single effect on all people
 - People were active in seeking out communications that served their purposes
 - Different groups used/read the same messages in different ways
 - Different groups received different gratifications from the same messages

- Structuralism – broke down the homogeneity of language
 - Language wasn't just a mirror of “objective” reality
 - Language is a process of construction
 - It works by building relationships between “signs” and meanings

- Poststructuralism – saw language and meaning as devices of power
 - Shifted thinking away from seeing meaning of words as something that is fixed and “true”
 - Towards looking at
 - The processes by which meaning is created and
 - How power interests work to support particular meanings and diminish others.
 - E.g. exclusive/inclusive language

The gist of audience reception theory

1. Any message carries within it a range of potential meanings – i.e. polysemy
 - This is a factor of
 - The range of potential meanings in language and signs
 - Literal or denotative meanings
 - Associative or connotative meanings
 - Meanings inherent in the context of reading
 - people's individual situations & histories, cultural positions and power relationships

The gist of audience reception theory

2. The audience is actively involved in the construction of meaning
 - Far from being passive individuals that are affected / impacted upon by media messages
 - Audiences actively read, interpret and adapt texts in their own contexts and to their own purposes.

The gist of audience reception theory

3. Making meaning out of messages / texts is an active business
 - Audiences work at “decoding” media rather than being “affected” by it.
 - Audiences share certain frameworks of interpretation and social identification that come into play when they read media
 - The process of “decoding” involves various levels of learned competencies or literacies, to read the “signs.”

The gist of audience reception theory

4. Any text therefore is capable of unlimited meaning (polysemy) in the hands of the audience
 - Communication is not a process, as much as a site in which social reality is negotiated within the context of broad cultural and communicative practices
 - At each point of the communication process, there is indetermination that allows readers to create their own meaning.

The gist of audience reception theory

5. The process of “decoding” meaning in mediated texts involves negotiations of power
 - Those in positions of power to communicate attempt to build determination into their message – i.e. a preferred meaning (class, gender, ethnicity, age, economic interests, political influence, etc)
 - In reading media texts, we engage with these power structures inherent within the text from our own positions (class, gender, economic positions, etc)

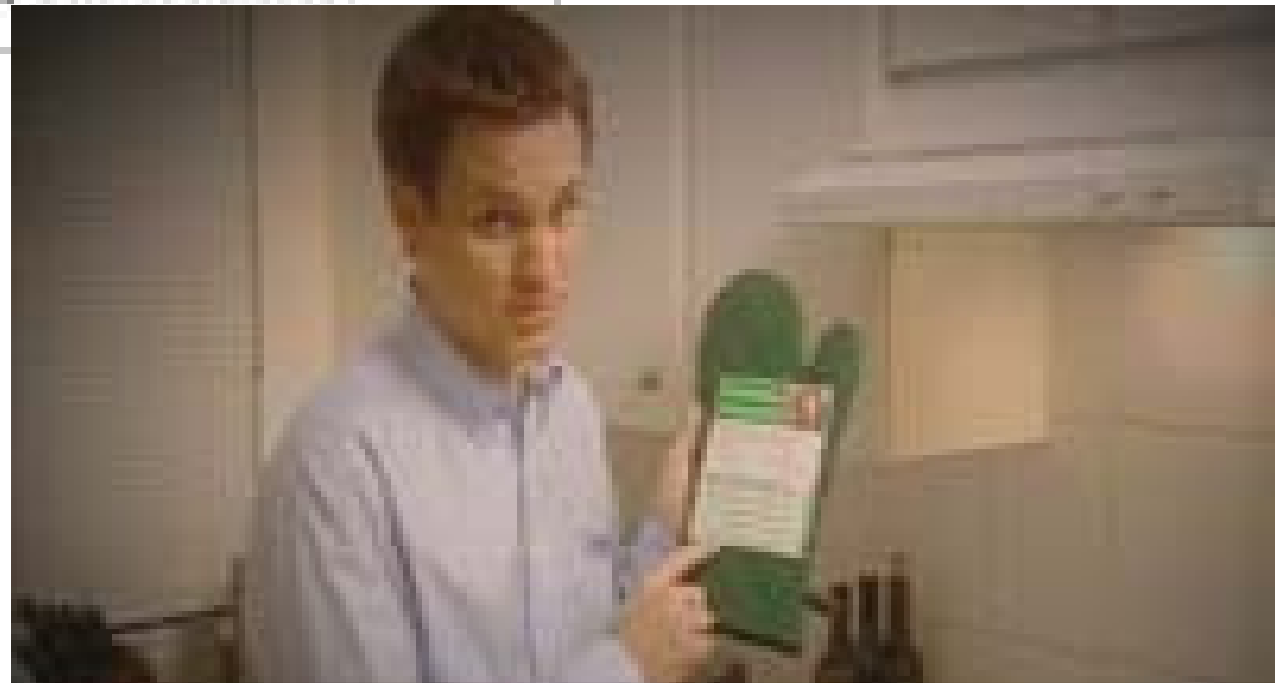
The gist of audience reception theory

6. Major types of audience readings (Hall):

- Dominant, hegemonic or preferred reading
 - Where the reader takes the message in terms of the references codes built into the encoding of the message.
- Oppositional
 - The reader recognizes the dominant meaning being encoded, but rejects it for cultural, political or ideological reasons
- Subversive
 - Where the reader recognizes the dominant meaning being encoded, but creates an alternative meaning that actively contradicts or undermines the intended or dominant meaning.
- Negotiated
 - Where the reader accepts, rejects or refines elements of the text and constructs their own modified understanding of what is presented.

Protecting the Australian way of life from a possible terrorist threat

Be alert, but not alarmed





just do it.

The study of audiences?

- Qualitative methodologies
 - Focus on the actual meanings that people draw from texts, not an assumed meaning
 - People may not be able to explain own behaviours
 - More interpretive than objective
 - Ethnography
 - Observing what people actually do with texts

Lasting contributions of audience reception

- You need to be aware of the complexity of textual meaning
- In studying communication you need to focus also on the audience
- Audiences are diverse groups of individuals, not just a single entity
- Audiences are active in the construction of meaning
- Communication is not a linear process but a complex process of cultural activity
- In relation to persuasion, audiences do not just accept persuasive messages, but work with them in their own terms.

Ien Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience*

Denis McQuail, *Audience Analysis*

AUDIENCES AND THE INDUSTRY

Live audiences and Mass audiences

- Live audiences are bound together by place and time
- Mass audiences are the product of urban industrial society. Masses are characterised by Herbert Blumer (1939) in terms of “largeness of scale, anonymity, and rootlessness.”
- For Blumer, the mass audience are joined by their shared attention on an object outside of their immediate environment

Criticisms of the concept of the Masses

- Masses tend to be characterised negatively as easily led, 'passive', alienated

Raymond Williams points out:

- that the masses are just 'other people'
- To conceive of an audience as a mass is to disregard the social relations which everyone is slotted into
- Communication texts are integrated into social experience – friendship, family, work, interests

Audience as Market and Ratings

- Commercial broadcasters defines audience as a market and the audience members are consumers
- Because there is no easy means of widespread feedback they use ratings
- Ratings estimate audience numbers, demographics, psychographics:
- In Melbourne TV ratings measured by people meters during the ratings period

Oztam Website:

<http://www.oztam.com.au/html/index.html>

- The only interest of commercial broadcaster (and advertisers) is whether people watch/listen to it

Audience as Public

- Public Broadcasters – ABC, PBS, BBC – are paternal systems
- Raymond Williams defines the paternal system as:
- “... an authoritarian system with a conscience; that is to say, with values and purposes beyond the maintenance of its own power.”
- The paternal system transmits values, habits and tastes to a public
- Here, the audience is a ‘public’ to be educated, to be taught what is good for ‘them’

Audience as an “object to be conquered”

- Ang points out that both the market view and the public viewpoints define the audience from the outside “as an object to be conquered”
- Either it is a mass of consumers or mass to be educated
- Ang wants to think about how people use texts

Goffman

Meyrowitz

Giddens

Slevin

MEDIA AND IDENTITY

Erving Goffman

- *The presentation of self in everyday life* (1959)
- *Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face behavior* (1967)
- *Relations in public: Microstudies of the public order* (1971)
- Communication is primarily a performance
 - We play the part of an actor
 - Our communication is shaped by the environment and the audience we're performing for
 - We locate ourselves in particular teams
 - We assume particular roles within those teams
 - We play out particular scripts.

- Communication is central to construction of our self-identity
 - In the process of interacting with others
 - We develop identity or persona
 - As a way of integrating the various parts of our self and our different contexts
- Front of stage behaviour and back of stage behaviour

Front of stage

- That part of our performance where behavior is standardized and normalized for public observation
- We control the information we give about ourselves in such a way as to convince the audience
- A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character
 - Who we are imputed to be is the product of a performance, not the cause of it.
- Our self-production is dependent on others
 - Other actors we team up with
 - The audience we seek to impress.

Back of stage

- A less public space in which we sort through the contradictions, conflicts and differences with ourselves and our teams.

Rules, conventions and rituals

- Our performances take place and are evaluated against given understandings of rules and rituals.
- These include
 - supportive interchanges,
 - remedial interchanges,
 - conventions such as place and space, opening and closing.
- Examples:
 - Interruption and remedial conventions
 - Telephone opening and closing

Conventions of preserve

- Preserves are places and spaces which have conventions associated with them
- Goffman looks at markers of these preserves, territorial offences, and the means to deal with these offences
- Communication is located within these preserves and their conventions

- Example:
 - Personal space – the space immediately around us
 - The stall – a well-bounded space to which I make temporary claim on an all-or-nothing basis
 - Use space – space required for a task
 - Turn or turn-taking – order in which I can proceed relative to others
 - The sheath – the skin or clothes covering the skin
 - Possessional territory – sets of objects or personal effects associated with the self
 - Information preserve – info I expect to have control of
 - Conversational preserve – the right to be able to control who can summon us into talk or who we can summon into talk

Critique of Goffman

- Looks at the hidden cultural conventions that impose meaning on communication
- Concepts of hegemony – who determines the conventions that determine the meaning?
- Joshua Meyrowitz, *No sense of place*
 - Electronic media have blended front and back stage
 - E.g. Big Brother, Big Loser, Survival
- Judith Butler, *Bodies that matter*
 - We construct meaning in our bodies by performing our bodies in line with the dominant discourses about bodies and sexuality within the culture

Identity

- Berger & Luckmann, 1979 *The social Constructions of Reality*: reflexive process
- Giddens, 1991 *Modernity and Self-Identity*: losing connections to local physical community through
 - increased mobility
 - dependence on technology
 - loss of authority on institutions

Modernist constructions of identity

- Utterances
 - “I am Australian” - national
 - “I am German” - ethnic
 - “I am Protestant” - religious
 - “I am a socialist” - political
 - “I am married” - sexual
 - “I am adult”, “I am male”, “I am rural”, etc
- Clothing
- Activities
 - Work & leisure
 - Relationships
 - Spaces occupied

Postmodern challenges

Utterances

- “I am religious but I don’t go to church”
- reflects failure of institutions of organised religion to adequately account for religious identity

Bodies

- reflects culture of pastiche where historical meaning is removed from the symbol

Activities

- returning to study after work
- delaying reproduction
- division of space by age grouping
- reflects a postponement or a redefinition of adulthood? (Dwyer et al, 2003)

Why?

Slevin, 2000

- Vastness
- Navigability
- Diversity
- Empowerment

Greater accessibility to information and connection to people calls for greater *agency*.



Postmodern identity & the Internet

Sherry Turkle, 1996 *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*

[Postmodernism is] difficult to define simply, but [it's] characterized by such terms as “decentered,” “fluid,” “nonlinear,” and “opaque.” They contrast with modernism, the classical world-view that has dominated Western thinking since the Enlightenment. The modernist view of reality is characterized by such terms as “linear,” “logical,” “hierarchical,” and by having “depths” that can be plumbed and understood. [...]

In a surprising and counter-intuitive twist, in the past decade, the mechanical engines of computers have been grounding the radically nonmechanical philosophy of postmodernism.

Turkle, 1996

Postmodern identity & the Internet

- Plays with the rules of identity construction
- Supports “disembedding” and challenges notions of community and place
- Alternative and competing social institution

Critique of Turkle

Hine 2000 *Virtual Ethnography*

Kennedy 2006 *Beyond Anonymity*

- Not just play
- “The virtual automatically transcends the real”

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MEDIA AND INTERACTIVITY

Defining interactivity

- Discursive function of text: how people *use* text
 - Means all text is interactive
 - Where people place text in context determines its meaning
- Transitional function of text: the text's *features*
 - Means how text can “move”
 - Means texts have varying degrees of interactivity

Levels of transitional interactivity

- None
 - E.g. Writing and printing, traditional electronic forms
 - The text has control over the user
- Indirect
 - E.g. Television ratings
 - Producers of text examine audience patterns
- Multi-platform
 - E.g. Reality TV and some fiction, talk-back radio
 - Producers of text offer space for audience involvement
 - Seen as virtual interactivity as the “space for interactivity” is controlled by the producer

Levels of transitional interactivity

- Streaming
 - E.g. Digital television
 - User can control how text is displayed
- Direct
 - E.g. File sharing networks, wikis
 - Users add text
 - Still a level of control by the medium and operators

Audience, identity and interactivity

- Levels of interactivity has implications on...
 - Audiences
 - From objects to networked communities
 - Identity
 - From receivers to users to an even more blurry definition
 - User=text

Further Reading

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- See Goffman, Meyrowitz and Butler from previous slides

Further reading

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