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Encoding-Decoding

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Encoding and decoding have been key concepts in communication for over fifty years, in keeping with the idea that language is a → code that needs to be cracked, and that the way it is received is as significant as the way that it is conceived. The connections of → linguistics to communication more generally have frequently deployed a message model: a sentence is given → meaning by the person uttering it, then interpreted and given new meaning by the person hearing it (Gleason 1961). Encoding-decoding has been used to explain different styles of

learning, via numerous studies of dyslexia, for example (Pernet et al. 2009; → Learning and Communication). It has transcended linguistics by focusing on the effect of encoders as they speak or gesture (Pell et al. 2009; → Gestures and Kinesics). Its most prominent place, however, is in media and → cultural studies, where it has been used to integrate the analysis of texts, producers, technologies, and audiences by thinking of them as coeval participants in the making of meaning (→ Speech Codes Theory).

Media and Cultural Studies

Encoding-decoding within media and cultural studies derives from the rejection of psychological models of → media effects. Instead, media and cultural studies borrowed from a form of western Marxism that rejected notions of thought-controlled populations, and a tendency in sociology that drew on ideas coming from across societies rather than simply from their elites. In the 1960s, the ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel coined the notion of a "cultural dope," a mythic figure who supposedly "produces the stable features of the society by acting in compliance with pre-established and legitimate alternatives of action that the common culture provides" (→ Ethnomethodology). He maintained that the "common sense rationalities … of here and now situations" actually used by people were obscured by such categorizations (Garfinkel 1992, 68).

This critique of media effects appealed across the human sciences draws on a venerable *tradition*, including Hans Robert Jauss's esthetics of reception and Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy of the mutual intrication of writer and reader in making meaning (Mattelart & Mattelart 1998, 119–120, 123). For his part, Michel Foucault assumes that people tend to resist media messages and ask pesky questions the more others try to indoctrinate them (2001, 927). The medievalist semiotician, columnist, and novelist Umberto Eco first systematized this position within media studies. In the mid-1960s, he developed the notion of encoding-decoding, open texts, and aberrant readings by audiences (Eco 1972). Eco looked at the ways that meanings were put into Italian TV programs by producers and deciphered by viewers, and the differences between these practices. His insights were picked up by the political sociologist Frank Parkin (1971), then by cultural studies theorists Stuart Hall (1980),

David Morley (1992), and Ien Ang (1982) on the left, and communications functionalist → Elihu Katz (1990) on the right.

Research Traditions

There have been two principal methodological iterations of the encoding–decoding approach: → uses and gratifications and ethnography/cultural studies. Uses and gratifications operates from a psychological model of needs and pleasures; cultural studies from a political one of needs and pleasures. Uses and gratifications focuses on what are regarded as fundamental psychological drives that define how people use the media to gratify themselves. Conversely, cultural studies' ethnographic work has shown some of the limitations to claims that viewers are stitched into certain perspectives by the interplay of narrative, dialogue, and → image. In the case of children and television – perhaps the most contentious and loaded area of audience study – anxieties from the effects tradition about the effect of violent media content have been partially challenged by research into how young people distinguish between fact and fiction; the particular generic features and intertexts of children's news, drama, action–adventure, education, cartooning, and play; and how talking about TV makes for social interaction (Buckingham 2005, 474–475). Children are not simply sponges soaking up content – they decode, just as adults encode for them (→ Violence as Media Content, Effects on Children of → Developmental Communication).

Similarly, despite speculation that → soap operas and *telenovelas* see women identify with maternal, policing functions and reactionary relations of happiness, encoding–decoding perspectives suggest that actual viewers may identify, for example, with "villainous" female characters because of their power. The genre appeals because it offers a world of glamour and joy in contradistinction to the workaday world of occupational and domestic patriarchy (Ang 1982; Seiter et al. 1989). This position has been elevated to a virtual nostrum in some later research into fans, who are thought to construct parasocial or imagined social connections to celebrities and actants in ways that either fulfill the function of friendship, or serve as spaces for projecting and evaluating schemas to make sense of human interaction (→ Fandom → Parasocial

Interactions and Relationships). Popular texts are said to be decoded by viewers in keeping with their social situations, hence empowering the powerless.

The active audience is said to be weak at the level of cultural production, but strong as an interpretive community, especially via imagined links to stars. In some of his later work, Eco suggests that viewers can "own" a text, psychologically if not legally, by quoting characters' escapades and proclivities "as if they were aspects of the fan's private sectarian world" (1987, 198). This world is then opened up to other followers through shared experiences such as conventions, web pages, discussion groups, quizzes, and rankings. Researchers in this tradition frequently described themselves as optimistic versus pessimistic, deriding those who deny the agency that audiences exercise. Audience resistance to the way programs are encoded by producers is supposedly evident from perusing audience paratexts or researchers watching with their children (Fiske 1987).

Bizarrely, such approaches have even turned into research tools for the media industries themselves: Mexican "novelas," now seen in more than a hundred countries, are researched and revised by TV Azteca via a blend of genre study and semantic analysis based on viewer interviews about their responses to stories as they unfold. Data and analysis from this method then determine future plots (Clifford 2005).

Some scholars have queried much of this research by asking whether it mistakenly emphasizes audience agency over political economy. For example, can fans be said to resist labor exploitation, patriarchy, racism, or in some specifiable way make a difference to politics beyond their own selves, when they interpret texts unusually, dress up in public as men from outer space, or chat about their romantic frustrations? Regardless, one abiding contribution definitively comes from the encoding–decoding model: that it is reductive to understand the media via methods that are purely textual, purely social, or purely scientific. The media and their audiences are not just things to be read; they are not just coefficients of political and economic power; and they are not just revelations from effects research. Rather, they are hybrid creatures, coevally subject to text, power, and science (→ Text and Intertextuality).

SEE ALSO: → Code → Cultural Studies → Developmental Communication → Ethnomethodology → Fandom → Gestures and Kinesics → Image → Katz, Elihu → Learning and Communication → Linguistics → Meaning → Media Effects → Parasocial Interactions and Relationships → Popular Culture → Soap Operas → Speech Codes Theory → Text and Intertextuality → Uses and Gratifications → Violence as Media Content, Effects on Children of

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