

# Reception theory

Reception theory is another way of getting beyond the blind spots of the media effects argument. However, it differs in important ways from the uses and gratification model. It asks what people see in the media and how they interpret media texts. It was arguably developed in relation to literary texts, but has proved useful in the study of media texts in general. The most notable version of reception studies is found in the work of the British scholar Stuart Hall, who introduced the encoding–decoding model. At the same time Blumler and Katz were developing their uses and gratifications media model in the early 1970s, Hall (2005) offered this important reevaluation of the media effects tradition. This was an effort to better understand the processes of media communication, which he suggested were made up of circuits of meaning. Hall suggests that modern communication apparatuses, such as radio and television (and later the Internet), do not construct their messages on a standard linear message–sender–receiver format. Instead, contemporary media rely upon a much more complex feedback loop that requires an understanding, from both producers and consumers, of storytelling, narrative and genre, as well as the contexts of production and consumption. Using the example of the news story, Hall develops his model of encoding and decoding, which offers an important framework for understanding the production and consumption of media texts.

**Reception theory** A theoretical model used to explore the way in which meaning in a text is generated through a reader's or viewer's experience of that text.

Each side of this equation mirrors the other. On the encoding side (the production side), a raw event, something that happens out there in the world, is

put together into story form, according to a range of criteria and mechanisms. This is echoed on the decoding side of his equation (the consumption side). We can exemplify with reference to the production of a news program:

- 1 *Technical infrastructure*: Such as cameras, studios and editing suites.
- 2 *Relations of production*: Economics of broadcasting (commercial broadcasting versus public broadcasting) and questions of ownership.
- 3 *Frameworks of knowledge*: Such as editing, camera angles, musical accompaniment and length.

These are mirrored on the decoding side of the model:

- 1 *Technical infrastructure*: Access to television or equivalent (via cable, Internet or satellite).
- 2 *Relations of production*: Questions of general access, tied to social and economic relationships (such as class, gender and ethnicity).
- 3 *Frameworks of knowledge*: Background information, story recognition, level of education and understanding of genre (such as investigative report, human interest stories, celebrity gossip or sports segments).

What links these two sides, Hall suggests, is a shared understanding of what makes up a story. There is an expectation on the part of the producers that viewers will understand elements of a raw event assembled into a recognisable story format. However, as he also notes, there is no guarantee that both sides understand the story in the same way. Stories are made up of complex sign systems, both visual and aural. The things we see and hear, the images combined with the soundtrack in a news story, are subject to what we have earlier referred to as the arbitrary nature of the sign. There is nothing natural about the correspondence between the organised sounds and images in a news story and what they come to mean. It is convention that links the meaning we take from events and how they come to be represented to us in particular forms (such as genres or narratives). The relationship between what we see and hear through our television—in other words, the meaning we take from these sights and sounds—is based on a set of shared cultural codes. However, we may not all sit in the same position with regard to these codes and conventions. There are, for example, a range of ways in which we might read a given news story, disposed as we are by our own experiences, expectations and literacies.

For Hall, meaning is not simply contained in the text itself. Instead, it is worked out by reference to a set of cultural codes, or what we are calling literacies. Thus, our class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and age influence how a text will be read. Our experience of the world, for example, may not fit with what we see represented on screen. The result can be competing interpretations of a given story, which can be seen as an example of what is called **hegemony**. This term, taken from the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, is another key idea in media studies (see Gramsci 1971). It describes the way in which a dominant group tries to gain the consent of a subordinate group (or groups). It may do this through political power, from the top down (coercion), but it may also do it more effectively through cultural means, from the bottom up (consent). The dominant group's values may be

**Hegemony** A term used to talk about political predominance, usually of one state over another. The use of the term in media studies has developed from the work of Antonio Gramsci, who showed that the ruling classes need the acceptance of their subordinates. To gain hegemony through an agreement of opinion is a struggle: a constant negotiation and renegotiation, organisation and reorganisation, of structuring experience and consciousness.

asserted through what is called a privileged reading of a text, for example. Telling the story in a particular way does this. Using editing, camera angles, narration, music, orientation and other techniques gives news stories a specific look and slant. The story may purport to tell all sides of the event, appearing to take an objective stance, but a careful analysis can reveal that it is biased towards a particular worldview. Hegemony, in this instance, presents a preferred worldview as the commonsense one, affirming the status quo as eternal and unquestionable.

For Gramsci (and Hall), however, what makes hegemony unique is that it is part of a dynamic struggle over meaning and cultural value. Because culture is never static, it means that those in power must always reaffirm and reassert their privileged control over it, as it can never be total or complete. There are gaps, in other words, that permit people to misread, intentionally or not, cultural texts. This allows them to resist, and even challenge, the privileged reading of a text. Hegemony, then, is about the struggle over meaning, and for media studies this is an important reconsideration of how power can be understood as much more widely spread and much less centralised.

Hall builds on Gramsci's ideas about social and cultural power by thinking about how media texts, in this case news stories, can be read from different social positions. Using the news, he classes these possible readings into three positions:

- 1 dominant–hegemonic
- 2 negotiated
- 3 oppositional.

An example of how these positions might work can be taken from a fictional nightly news story. Imagine the story involves a politician putting forward a Bill that advocates a tax break for corporations. Those who share this point of view, in other words, who are part of the dominant–hegemonic group, would see this as reflecting their worldview in a positive way. They would read this story relatively 'straight', as it confirms their ideological stance with regard to the economy. A middle-class viewer might take a negotiated position, as someone whose taxes may go up, but who recognises that, in order to help the economy grow (which may or may not benefit them in the end), businesses should be given a tax break. An oppositional reading, on the other hand, would see this as yet another concession to those in power. Someone in this position recognises a contradiction between the worldview privileged on the screen, and his or her own experience of the world.

One simple way to consider how we might begin to analyse a story, then, is to consider not only what is represented, but rather what is not represented. Could the story have been told differently? What does the choice of music tell us about the constructed tone of the story? What about the editing? How much context do we really get in a news story, and how much ends up being cut out? While Hall places an emphasis on news stories, this model of reading can be equally applied to other narrative texts as well. It is useful to media studies, because it suggests that there is a range of possible readings of a given text, and that we each bring something to bear upon our understanding of the media. We can read a text straight, or we can

read 'against the grain' of a text. From our background and current experiences, our encounter with any media text can confirm or deny our worldview.

Hall's work, along with that of a number of other scholars, constitutes a shift in how audiences have come to be understood. There is stronger emphasis placed on what is called the **active audience**. The meaning is not simply in the text, but relies upon a whole set of other, related, social factors. Other researchers have done extensive work using Hall's model, three of which are discussed in more detail below.