

Stuart Hall's Encoding-Decoding Model: A Critique

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Abstract: Media effect studies have engaged the industry of media scholars for over a century. Different periods produced different results. As science and technology advanced and as instruments for research improved with the focus of researchers, results have continued to emerge. Stuart Hall Encoding-Decoding model is one of such studies. Through analysis of the model and criticisms on it, these authors note that the model shall remain significant in media effect studies. The model's consequent semiotic democracy or semiotic disobedience is a warning to designers of messages to study. This is imperative whether it is person-to-person communication, group or mass communication.

Key words: Critical • Analysis • Stuart Hall • Encoding • Decoding • Model

INTRODUCTION

Every designer of media message has the audience in mind while designing the messages. Consequently, the media are full of messages from different sources, consequent upon which the media audience members are inundated with an avalanche of messages. From the time of the hypodermic needle or magic bullet theory to the present time, sources of messages in the media always encode their messages the way to suit them and expect the audience to decode in like manner.

Specifically, in the era of the magic bullet theory, the media audiences were seen as an atomized group of people who were passive and therefore incapable of thinking for themselves. As a result, scholars in that era believed that media messages had direct, immediate, powerful and uniform effects on the audience members. They also claimed that the audience members acted according to the media messages they had received. Explaining the theory, Alegu [1] writes, that in the early attempts to understand the effect of mass communication, the media messages was likened to a bullet released at a member of the audience. Like a bullet, the message would be received by the individual directly and it would have an immediate and powerful effect on her, persuading her to behave exactly the way the media messages advocate.

However, further researches challenged the powerful effect perspective which was the hallmark of the magic bullet theory; arguing that contrary to the

assumption that media messages had all powerful effects, there were mediating factors or intervening variable which limited the effects of the mass media message. This thinking gave rise to two-step-flow in which case, the opinion leaders got information from the media and then passed same to the other media audience members who depended on them for such, add their own interpretations; then, the social categories approach whereby the members of the audience determined how they reacted to media messages; the individual difference approach where each member of the audience reacted to media messages differently according to their different characteristics in terms of psychology, among other things. Baran and Davis [2] argues that "These differing effects are partially caused by our exposure, perception, attention and retention of media content.....".

Later on, media researchers discovered that different audience members put the media to different uses so as to satisfy their different desires and cognition. This is the hallmark of uses and gratification theory. Bittner [3] contends that "some of the needs satisfied by the mass media include: education, information, entertainment, socialization, escape, relaxation, ego-boosting, etc. this implies that since the audience members can decide which medium to expose themselves to; they are therefore active audience members as against the position of the magic bullet theorists who portrayed the audience as being passive.

However, Stuart Hall's Encoding-Decoding Model presents the audience members as not only being active as to decide which medium to expose themselves to, but are able to give meanings that are not the same encoder's messages which may or may not be as the encoder intended. This work seeks to critically analyze Stuart Hall's Encoding- Decoding Model.

The Encoding-Decoding Model:an Overview: In 1973, Stuart Hall produced a mimeographed report which was later to be published as a book chapter in 1980. In the essay entitled "Encoding/Decoding in Television Discourse, Stuart Hall offers a theoretical approach into ways in which media messages are encoded and disseminated by the encoder and subsequently interpreted by the decoders (Receivers of such media messages).

Hall argues that "researchers should direct their attention toward analysis of the social and political context in which content is produced (Encoding) and the consumption of media content (Decoding). In agreement with Hall's proposition, Hall [4] write that researchers should not make unwarranted assumptions about either encoding or decoding, but should conduct research permitting them to carefully assess the social and political context in which media content is produced and the everyday life context in which it is consumed. The position of the scholar is that mass media content producers can produce their message in a particular way and assume that the audience will understand it in the same way they intended, but the audience members can assign meanings and interpretation to the media content in accordance with their various backgrounds.

Commenting on the encoding/decoding model, Katyal [5] supports the above observation thus, "His model claims that TV and other media audiences are presented with messages that are decoded, or interpreted in different ways depending on an individual's cultural background, economic standing and personal experience. In contrast to other media theories that disempowered audience, Hall advanced the idea that audience members can play an active role in decoding messages as they rely on their own social contexts and might be capable of changing messages themselves through collective action". The import of Hall's Encoding/Decoding model is that audience members are not docile or passive, but are capable of giving varying interpretations to the media content they have exposed themselves to, based on their experiences. McQuail [6], Nweke [7] and Okunna [8] argue that encoding/decoding model can "be understood as the view of mass communication from the position of many

different receivers who do not perceive or understand the message 'As sent' or as expressed'. This model has its origins in the Critical theory, Semiology and Discourse Analysis. It is located more in the domain of the cultural rather than the social sciences".

According to Stuart Hall, consumers of media messages can give three types of readings to media messages. They include: preferred reading, negotiated reading and oppositional reading. The type of reading they give to the media messages is as a result of the position they assume while reading the text which can either be dominant/hegemonic position, negotiated position or oppositional position; and this together with the context and cultures of the media messages have both denotative and connotative meanings. He also believes that codes and signs have multiplicity of meanings. This is what he calls polysemy. Therefore, media messages can be polysemous in nature. Okunna [8] elucidate in clear terms the thoughts of Stuart Hall on the three types of readings that consumers of media texts give to media messages and contents. According to them, "Hall argued that although most texts are polysemic, the producers of a message generally intend a preferred, or dominant, reading when they create a message. As a critical theorist, Hall assumed that most popular media contents have a preferred reading reinforcing the status quo. But in addition to this dominant reading, it is possible for audience members to make alternate interpretations. They might disagree with or misinterpret some aspects of a message and come up with an alternative or negotiated meaning differing from the preferred reading in important ways. In some cases, audience might develop interpretations in direct opposition to a dominant reading. In that case, they are said to engage in oppositional decoding".

It is true that communicators choose to encode message for ideological and institutional purposes and to manipulate language and media for those ends (Media messages are given a preferred' or what might now be called' spin?). Secondary, receivers (Decoders) are not obliged to accept messages as sent, but can resist ideological influence by applying variant or oppositional readings' according to their own experience and outlook. This is described as differential decoding [8]. Lending his voice in support of the above observation, Nweke [7] contends that although people are susceptible to domination by communication technologies, 'they are able to exploit contradictions that enable them to resist, re-cycle and re-design those technologies... and people are capable of decoding and appropriating received messages and are not necessarily duped by them".

The import of the above observations is that the media producers have all the latitudes to encode, design or formulate their messages which way they want according to their ideological and institutional disposition and purposes. They are also at the liberty to expect the audience to read and understand those messages according to the way they intended according to their context and cultural backgrounds. It can be said that both the encoders and decoders see the same messages from different angles and positions. Just like the proverbial elephants observed by different blind people, each of the blind persons gives different description as a result of which part of the elephants he touched. This can be described as democratization which guarantees freedom of choice and expression of opinions without any constraints arising from the sender of the message.

Stuart Hall maintains that "the level of connotation of the visual sign, of its contextual reference and positioning in different discursive fields of meaning and association, is the point where already coded signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional, more active ideological dimensions [8]. He goes on to add that 'the so-called denotative level of the television sign is fixed by certain, very complex (But limited or closed') codes. But its connotative level, though also bounded, is more open, subject to more active transformation, which exploit its polysemic values.

The Big Question: In the light of the foregoing, the big question now remains: what is the relevance of effective communication since audience member are at liberty to assign meanings and interpretations that are not in tandem with the encoder's intentions and expectations? According to Katyal [5]" an effective communication is that communication where message which the source intends to send is exactly what he sends and what he sends is what the receiver receives, thereby paving way for the desired or expected feedback". Was Hall unaware of the concept of effective communication? Far from it. Hall did not fail to note that "Television producers who find their messages' failing to get across' are frequently concerned with straightening out the kinks in the communication chain, thus, facilitating the effectiveness of their communication" [4]. Quoting Terni, Hall argues that "by the word 'reading' we mean not only the capacity to identify and decode a certain number of signs, but also the subjective capacity to put them into creative relation between themselves and with other signs; a capacity which is, by itself, the condition for a complete awareness of one's total environment. The summary of

the whole issue is that audience members are given the latitude to assign meaning and interpretations to the message of the encoder in line with their social, political and cultural environments not minding the intentions of the encoder(s). This stems from the fact that they are rational beings who can expose themselves to media messages and form their opinions from what they understand from what have read.

Stuart Hall's Motivation for the Model: Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model would not have come by chance. Circumstances must have prompted him to formulate the Encoding/Decoding Model. According to Bittner [3]. Hall developed his approach in part as a reaction to a tradition of Marxist film criticism found in the film journal *The Screen*, which viewed mainstream popular films as inherently deceptive and supportive of an elite-dominated status quo- a view pioneered by the Frankfurt School. 'Frankfurt School refers to the group of scholars who originally worked in the Frankfurt Institute of social Research and immigrated to the USA after the Nazis came to power. The central project of the group was the critical analysis of modern culture and society in the Marxist tradition' [3]. Among the influential figures in the school were Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and Leo Lowenthal. They were instrumental to the development of critical theory in North America and Europe after World War II especially in media and cultural studies. The writers of the Journal did not hide their approval and acceptance of "avant-garde films in which there was no pretense about depicting a 'real' social world'. Moved by the circumstances on ground, Hall registered his disapproval and objection to the cultural elitism for which the Journal was replete with. He thought it wrong to assume that popular films necessarily served to deceive and subvert working-class audiences. There might well be cases in which these films actually made moviegoers less supportive of the status quo. In fact, the messages the movies and British new wave films mentioned, offered explicit and strong challenges to the United States and the Great Britain committed to business as usual after World War II. In addition, Hall did not think that it was reasonable to expect that working class audiences should embrace avant-grade films as providing a better sway of understanding the social world" [2].

Hall thus, proposed an approach to audience research known as reception studies, otherwise called reception analysis. At the center of his approach is the focus on how various types of audience members make

sense of specific forms of media content. Drawing his inspiration from the French Semiotic theory, he argued that every media contents can be seen as texts made up of signs which are structured and related to another in definite and specific ways and can only make sense to its readers when he or she is able to interpret both the signs and their structure. Therefore, for a sentence to make sense to its readers, he must have not only understood the individual words that make up the sentence, but should also interpret its overall structure.

Application of Hall's Encoding-Decoding Model: In 1980, David Morley published one in the series of the first detailed studies using Stuart Hall's insights. His work provided the ground for subsequent reception analysis. Morley, a sociologist conducted his research by asking twenty-nine groups of people whom he selected that cut across various social backgrounds to watch an episode from *Nationwide*, a popular daily news programme that was aired on BBC 'assessing the economic consequences for three families of the government's annual budget'. Once the programme ended, the groups discussed what they had watched and offered their interpretations'' [1]. Morley found out that the only few persons went for dominant reading. However, at the other extreme, a group of union shop stewards liked the format of the programme but objected to its messages. They saw it as too sympathetic to middle management and failing to address fundamental economic issues. Morley labeled their decoding as oppositional''

Apart from David Morley, Dick Hebdige and Janice Radway have also applied Hall's Encoding-Decoding Model. For example, Hebdige who studied under Hall became influential through his book '*Subculture: The Meaning of Style*' an idea he borrowed from Hall's idea of subculture. In that influential book, he argues that younger generations are challenging dominant ideologies by developing distinct styles and practices that manifest their separate identity and subversions. Also, Janice Radway, an American literary and cultural studies scholar carried out a research on romance reading by women in her book, '*Reading The Romance: Women Patriarchy and Popular literature*'. Radway studied women that read romance novels. Radway argued that activity of reading romance novels acted as personal time for women who never had one for themselves. Even though, her work was not recognized as scientific because it applied only to a small number of women, she interpreted how women could relate their everyday life activity to a fiction book like the romance novels.

Oppositional Decoding-Semiotic Democracy or Semiotic Disobedience?: People can make media serve certain purposes, such as using media to learn information manage moods and seek excitement. When we use media in these ways, we are intentionally working to induce meaningful experiences. The various 'meaning-making perspectives' assert that when people use media to make meaning, when they are able to intentionally induce desired experience, there often are significant results, some intended and other unintended [6].

Nowadays, the audience members are at liberty to give the kind of interpretation they deem fit to the media content they have exposed themselves to, not minding the encoder's intention or expectation of how his message should be read and understood. This is Semiotic Democracy.

However, the concern of media researchers is whether the semiotic democracy is degenerating into semiotic disobedience. According to Hall [4] semiotic disobedience refers to individuals' ability to reinvent or subvert media content, to impose a personally meaningful reading; by appositionally redefining that content for themselves and others. Quoting Fiske (1987), they observe that semiotic democracy is audience members' ability to make their own meaning from television content.

Another bugging question emanating from Hall's model is: Can oppositional reading be described as semiotic disobedience or semiotic democracy? As conceptualized by Stuart Hall in his encoding/decoding, it can be said that oppositional reading is semiotic democracy as Hall has argued that audience member are at liberty to give interpretations and assign meanings to media texts according to their social and cultural backgrounds. Okunna [8] compares and contrasts semiotic democracy and semiotic disobedience. According to him, semiotic democracy and semiotic disobedience aim to create a dialogue where none is absent and tries to reclaim the inducement of passivity among media consumers. Further, both semiotic democracy and semiotic disobedience seek to reverse the privileged position of the speaker or author and make the audience an active participant instead of a generally passive spectator. Although, semiotic disobedience arguably shares many of the same goals of semiotic democracy, there are important differences between the two concepts. First, semiotic disobedience deliberately situates itself outside the boundaries of protected speech for the purpose of challenging those boundaries altogether. Second, unlike semiotic democracy's willingness to place consumers and

corporation on an equal playing field, semiotic disobedience is largely substitutive. It attempts to occupy and "recode" the sovereignty of corporate space for the purpose of restoring critical balance between consumer and corporation.

A Critique of Encoding-Decoding Model: Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model has both strengths and weaknesses. Hall [4] observe that it focuses attention on individuals in mass communication process, respects the intellect and ability of media consumers, acknowledges range of meaning in media texts, seeks an in-depth understanding of how people interpret media content and can provide an insightful analysis of the way media are used every day in social contexts. In their thinking, the aforementioned points are the areas of strengths of the theory and just like it has been stated, Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model recognizes the active role of media texts and the kind of interpretation to give to the media texts so read. The model sees the audience members as active rather than passive among other things.

However, the shortcomings of the theory include the facts that it is usually based on subjective interpretation of audience reports, cannot address presence or absence of effects, uses qualitative research methods, which precludes casual explanations and that it has been too oriented toward the micro level (But is attempting to become more macroscopic) [4]. The scholars believe that audience reports upon which the theory is based is usually subjective rather than objective owing to the liberty which audience members have to decide how to decode the media texts. According to them, model cannot address the presence or otherwise of effects since the audience members give subjective interpretations to media texts based on their social and cultural backgrounds, among other things.

CONCLUSION

Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model is a testimony to the active audience perspective of media research. For one, it presents the audience member as not only being able to decide what to expose themselves to, but also that they can go beyond deciding the media texts to read; to giving varying interpretation and meanings to what they have read in accordance to their social, political and cultural backgrounds. The model does not see audience members as homogenous; hence the freedom given them to assign meaning to media text based

on their orientation and background. It recognizes the heterogeneous nature of the audience members. Therefore, media audience members should avail themselves the benefits of semiotic democracy provided by Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model and enjoy them without necessarily allowing the semiotic democracy slide into semiotic disobedience. By so doing, at least media texts should have a semblance of an effective communication.

Hall's model brings to the fore the need for audience study before designing messages for them. The implications of semiotic democracy and semiotic disobedience do not foreclose the possibility of media effects. Rather they warn the communicator, at whatever level, to undertake prior study of the audience before designing messages for that audience.

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