

# Media effects theory evaluation



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This chapter consists of two parts. In the first section I will critically review media effects theories and explore relevant theoretical approaches underpinning active audience studies. I will also discuss recent studies exploring media influence, delving into the methodological approaches as well as observing different ways that the media are claimed to have impact on people's understanding. In particular, I will focus on literatures in areas of risks and health, as well as examining studies utilising creative methods for studying media influence, all which I will relate to my findings chapters. The way in which media influence is contextualised in this research however, should not be misunderstood as trying to prove any direct impact media have on people. Instead, my intention is to offer ways of thinking about media influence and hopefully this would help build a link between my findings and the theoretical body. I will reiterate my stance towards the end of the chapter whilst situating my research within literatures of media influence.

In the second part of my literature, I will explore research conducted in areas of infant feeding, in particular to studies about breastfeeding and the media. This section will offer variety ways of exploring breastfeeding issues and how studying the media would fit into the social context and problems related to breastfeeding. I will also explore studies conducted in different cultural settings, which hopes to highlight the different ways culture and religion can influence infant feeding practices and their overall understanding of breastfeeding. What I hope to achieve by the end of this chapter is to give an idea of the different directions to studying breastfeeding in the media and defend my approach in this thesis. I then conclude this chapter by

positioning my research within the theoretical, methodological and empirical framework that I have explored throughout.

## **Media Effects, active audiences and beyond**

### **Review of Media effects theories**

Early works on media influence are focused on media's effects on human behaviours (ref). The idea that the media has powerful effects on people gained ground during the 1930's, in light of the elite's fascist treatment towards society and dictators using the media as propaganda tool in countries like Germany and Russia. Research emphasis at the time was to find out what the media can do to people (ref) and this brought about the first theory of media effects (the hypodemic needle model), envisioned by scholars of the Frankfurt school in 1923 which suggests that media content are injected into audience thoughts and thus would influence their behaviours. Such studies assumed causal link between mass media and mass audience, suggesting that the media has a " magic bullet" effect that could result to media-inspired mass behavior (for example see works of Cantril et al., 1940; Lasswell 1927 and Lippman, 1922). Researchers at the time sought to link between media representations and mass behavior, mostly were concerned over the (harmful) effects media has on society. This gave rise to studies supporting strong media effects and sets the parameter for most media research that took place between the 1940s to the 1960s (for example see Bandura and Walters, 1963; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). It was one of the reasons why media effects studies was popular and gained much importance in the field of media studies at the time.

However, hypodemic needle model or “ magic bullet” theory is flawed in so many ways. The word media effects itself put much emphasis and power to the media that followers of hypodemic needle model / magic bullet theory often ignored the fact that audience themselves are active producers of meaning. Media and audience relationship does not exist in void but is involved and influenced by many things, among others, social context, culture and political-economy of a society. Audience consists of individuals who have different social and cultural backgrounds which makes it problematic if not impossible, to conceptualise one mass audience. It is then renders attempts to measure media effects difficult and complex.

Researchers tried to improve this link by including additional stages/layers to media effects, such is done by Lazarsfeld and Katz (1955) when they introduced opinion leaders into the process – a model which is also known as the two steps flow. What this model argues is that the effects of media on audience are mediated by different key individuals, who tends to be people with most access to the media and are assumed to be more media literate. These are ‘ opinion leaders’ who are sought to explain and diffuse media content to others. Although this model reduces the “ direct effects”, it still simplifies the process involved between media and audience, and more importantly maintains audience’s position at the receiving end of this relationship. This does not only sustain the idea that audiences are passive but also renders them incapable of producing their own interpretations.

Another social theory which tries to explain media effects was developed by George Gebner in the 1960s, known as the Cultivation theory. The theory proposed that the media has long term effects on audiences, nurturing

certain ideas through representations and media discourse. The cultivation theory springs from a large-scale research project called ‘ Cultural Indicators’, a project that was aimed to explore media processes and track effects (particularly violent programming) on audiences (Miller, 2005, p. 281). A part of the study investigates the relationship between audience attention to media messages and their conceptions of social reality (Morgan, p; 70 and Shanahan and Morgan p. 6-7). Findings suggest that exposure to television, over time subtly “ cultivates” audiences’ perceptions of reality. This “ cultivation effects” are claimed to affect light television viewers as well because the media (television) functions as a tool for socialisation and enculturation process (Gerbner and Gross, 1976: 175). Therefore, the theory suggests that any impact television has on heavy users will also, in time, impact on the entire culture. Gerbner et al (1986: 23) later notes that this impact does not necessarily imply a unidirectional process but rather, it is a complex development built through subtle interactions between medium and its publics. Miller (2005: 282) reiterates this point by explaining that the impetus of cultivation theory was not to prove specific media effects on behaviours, but to highlight media’s overarching influence towards the way people think about the world. Gerbner’s idea was widely accepted however, similar to the previous media effects theories, it supports the notion that audience is vulnerable and easily manipulated. Cultivation theory asserts power to the media and regards audiences as subjects with limited interpretation, ignoring their social context and ability to generate own meanings.

The many limitations of media effects theories have prompted researchers to switch focus. Following cluster of research in media studies question media power and shift emphasis towards studying audiences and their use of the media. Theorists such as Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1974) argued for a model that acknowledges audience as powerful receivers. They proposed Uses and Gratification theory which challenged the traditional way of looking at media-audience relationship by asking “ what people do with the media” rather than “ what the media does to people” (Katz, 1959). This approach suggests that people have specific needs and use the media to satisfy them or gain specific gratifications. Blumler and Katz (1974) proposed four broad audience needs that are fulfilled by the media. These include diversions (a form of escapism from everyday life), Personal Relationships (where viewers build communities through conversations about television or how they relate to the characters), Personal Identity (where audience explore, re-affirm or question their identity in regards to the characters identities) and Surveillance (where the media are referred for information about what is happening elsewhere). These four needs are argued to represent the ways audience establish their relationship with the media.

While uses and gratification model provides a useful framework for thinking about audience’s relationship with the media, critics question the fundamental structure of this theory. Researchers who are in support of media effects theories for example, questioned the notion of gratification itself, which in a way could be seen as a “ media effect”. It was also argued that this approach focused heavily on audience use of the media, rather than how audiences make meanings of media content. Therefore, uses and

gratification theory does not foregrounds itself in the theoretical debate, rather it focuses on the methodological approach of media studies, offering a way of doing media research, as opposed to contextualizing the relationship between media and audience (Littlejohn, 2002; Severin and Tankard, 1997; McQuail 1994). Therefore, studies adopting this approach were more focused on examining audience psychological needs and often overlook the importance of socio-cultural elements of audience needs.

All the theoretical approaches discussed thus far have only allocated power to either the audience or the media. One of the pioneer works to break away from this over emphasis of unilateral power was established by Stuart Hall's through his encoding/decoding model. Hall (1980) argues that media producers 'encode' specific meanings in media text, which is distributed to audiences who will then decode and (re)produce these meanings through their own understanding (Hall, 1980: 128). Hall suggests that the media (television) is an iconic sign because it possesses some of the qualities for the object in which they represent (Hall, 1980: 131) and the process involved to produce and interpret these iconic signs is known as encoding/decoding.

Hall does not just chart a middle ground between audience and the media but also introduced media producers into the equation and their roles in this relationship. Hall argues that producer's agendas and assumptions are encoded in media text and that this shapes the 'preferred meanings' of the text, albeit embedded in codes and convention of a particular medium to hide the text own ideological construction. Such meanings limit and guide audience interpretations, although specific frameworks outside the text such as socio-economic frameworks (for example gender, education and

ethnicity), do play a role to influence audience's interpretations. Hall's approach is in line with the social constructionists, where previous knowledge as well as experience of the media and the subject discussed played an important part to help construct people's perception.

While Hall's notion of preferred meanings does not suggest that audience is homogenous, their interpretations will however, be consistent to producer's intended idea. However, he suggests that audience can encode preferred meanings in a slightly different manner, in which Hall refers to as the margin of understanding. Hall's encoding/decoding model suggests the meaning of a text lies somewhere between the producer and the reader. One of the reasons why encoding/decoding model is significant in media studies is because it balances the relationship between the media and audience, returning some power to the media while maintaining audience as active participants. This approach acknowledges both audience and the media as sites of meaning making.

Hall further develops a model for the types of audience decoding. The four identified readings are (1) Dominant – when audience recognise and agree with the preferred meaning offered by media text (2) Oppositional – when audience understand the preferred meaning but disagree with it because it contradicts to their own set of beliefs and attitudes (3) Negotiated – when audience opposes or adapts to the preferred meaning and (4) Aberrant decoding – when audience gives meanings deviant to the preferred meaning. Morley however notes that this model is limited because preferred meaning is itself an unclear concept. This is because the model tends to overlap text and producer's intention as preferred meaning, when they actually involve



different processes and that preferred meaning may not always be embedded in text. It is therefore difficult to conceptualise preferred meaning, one which can be easily confused with something that is agreed by majority of the text audience.

Kitzinger (1998) further argues that oppositional reading is sometimes a problematic term because people do not necessarily understand the preferred meaning. In her research she found out that people's understanding sometimes intersect with pre-existing knowledge and mental pictures of other things, particularly when an issue is new and has not received much media attention. For example, in her research she found that some people do not understand the preferred meanings of HIV media awareness campaign and uses their pre-existing knowledge of AIDS as a way to understand and decode media messages about HIV. Nonetheless, despite limitations to Hall's types of audience readings, encoding/decoding model continues to serve as an advantageous model in media studies.

Among others, Hall's encoding/decoding model has led to an increasing interest to explore media reception and audiences as active participants. A significant body of work developed in the UK focused on audience studies, but positioned within cultural framework (for example see Ang 1985; Morley, 1980; Radway, 1987). The foundations for this body of work is championed by Hall himself at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (BCCCS) and his colleagues such as David Morley (1980) who explored how people from different (sub)cultures responded to the same media output (the BBC channel current affairs programme Nationwide). His Nationwide Audience Research adopted a semiotic approach to understanding audience

responses to media text. Morley compiled audience responses from various different class and social/cultural backgrounds after they watched an episode of the news/current affairs programme Nationwide. Through these interviews, Morley tried to observe whether participants obtained a preferred reading from the programme.

In a way, Morley's work puts Hall's Encoding/Decoding model to the test. From his findings, Morley argues that encoding/decoding model is insufficient because it underestimated the variety of determinants in decoding a reading (Fiske, 1989). Morley argues that people may decode according to Hall's audiences' decoding positions but this process intersects with sociological demographics such as age, gender and also the context for viewing the programme (Morley, 1980: 26; 1992-99). What this propose is that the meaning of text is interpreted within audiences' sociological and cultural framework which may influence their knowledge, prejudices and resistance towards a discourse. Members of a given sub-culture will tend to share a cultural orientation towards decoding messages in particular ways and that their individual "readings", whether dominant, negotiated or oppositional are framed by shared cultural formations and practices' (1981b, p. 51). This 'shared' cultural interpretation may (or may not) cut across different groups from different economic backgrounds and social class (Morley 1980). In his body of work, audiences are seen to actively consume media for pleasure, reinforcement and identity construction, a framework that focuses on media consumption and the role media play in popular culture. By emphasising that '...the meaning is not in the text, but in the reading' (siapa) it opens up possibilities for audience reception studies and looking at the relationship

between media and audience, in relations to other social context. His study was therefore considered one of the major turn around point in the history of media studies. According to David Morley:

“ Before Messages can have effects on audiences, they must be decoded. ‘ Effects’ is thus a shorthand, and inadequate, way of marking the point where audiences read and make sense of messages.” (Morley 1978, p125  
(emphasis added)

He later adds

“ Of course, there will always be individual private readings, but we need to investigate the extent to which these individual readings are patterned into cultural structures and clusters” (Morley 1980)

Researchers continued to explore reception studies and studying audience became a popular trend for media researchers in the 1990s. Expanding Morley’s approach which looks at how people from different cultural backgrounds interpret representations in media, researchers were interested to explore people’s personal and socio-cultural context as an integral part for understanding the rich range of meanings ‘ decoded’ and understood by media audience. On the whole, these studies adopted a “ culturalist” perspective and are concerned with exploring audience active choices, consumptions and interpretations of media materials. Such research emphasizes audience interpretations of the text based on their individual cultural background and life experiences. In essence, the meaning of a text is not inherent within the text itself, but is created within different processes involved in the relationship between the text and the reader.

For example, Katz and Liebel (1985) conducted a cross-cultural study on television soap Dallas in Japan, Israel and Russia. They concluded that various ethnic groups differed in their interpretation of foreign television programme, in which they referred to as 'critical distance'. From the research, Liebes (1988: 281) suggested that different groups perceive selectively towards what they watch and that this played a part in the forms of retelling and the talk they generate about a television program. A basic acceptance of the meaning of a specific text tends to occur when audience share traits and cultural background, which then may lead to the text being interpreted in similar ways.

Culture has an interpretative function for the members of a group which share that particular culture. Nonetheless, expressions of culture-resultant behaviour are modified by the individuals' personality, upbringing and life-experience to a considerable degree. Developments in cross-cultural audience studies have deepened our understanding of media reception in different cultures and the different relationship audiences have with the media. This process plays a role in the development of other issues for example, production of identity and popular culture. Audience use existing cultural frameworks to (re)construct meaning from a media text, thus it is through audience interpretations that we are able to gain more comprehension towards the culture to which that audience belongs (Gauntlett).

This new approach for looking at media-audiences relationship was coined New Audience Research (Ang 1996, Morley 1990, etc). Researchers such as Curran et. al. (1996) saw this as a revolutionary rethink of the dispersion of

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power within the media-audience relationship, while scholars such as Fiske (1987) proclaim power of the audience. As Fiske commented on Morley's Nationwide Study:

“ Its value for us lies in its shift away of emphasis away from the textual and ideological construction of the subjects to socially and historically situated people. It reminds us that actual people in actual situations watch and enjoy actual television programmes.” (Fiske 1989, p63)

Indeed Fiske, ever enthusiastic of Morley's research, said that it established ethnographic research as a legitimate tool to understand audiences (Fiske 1989). The focus on human beings in their social settings seems to a contemporary reader to be quite an obvious component of audience research.

The influential academic journal Screen began to take up the idea that the audience was made up of more meaning than that disseminated by the text (Fiske 1989). This led to a generation of media and cultural studies protagonists who turned their focus away from semiotic analysis of the text and the individual and tried to focus

on the social background of the audiences and how they decode the text itself. Their work appeared from the early 70s to the mid 80s and mostly conducted qualitative field work on small groups from targeted socioeconomic backgrounds (Nightingale 1996).

The idea of the audience being able to make their own readings and the move away from semiotics was given a more pluralistic (Morley 1990)

element by cultural studies writer John Fiske. Fiske was influenced heavily by the French polymath Michel de Certeau (Underwood, 2008), who advocated that people were continuously trying to undermine the dominant culture by creating tactics of resistance within everyday life.

Fiske incorporated this into the idea of the 'active audience' (Fiske 1989, pp 62-83), believing that audiences constantly tried to find new meanings inside media and that it was programmes that were made by industry, not text.

Fiske maintained that:

"Texts are the product of their readers. So a programme becomes a text at the moment of reading." (Fiske 1989, p 14)

And that:

"Texts are the site of conflict...between production and reception." (Fiske 1989, p14).

From this freedom of meaning and conflict, audiences are capable of creating all sorts of resistance readings to the preferred dominant culture, constantly changing it in the process as elites try to catch up and encircle the masses into its fold once more. Fiske (1990) takes the example of jeans as fashion items – 'they' produce jeans and 'we' alter them to look more trendy, so 'they' react again. Creating a cycle of resistance by the active audiences/consumers and the dominant classes. Fiske continues, maintaining that there is no such thing as a homogenised audience, but rather a collection of pluralised audiences that are created from a multiplicity of backgrounds. Fiske maintained that this multiplicity of meaning amounts

to a 'semiotic democracy' (Fiske 1989, p95) where people are 'culturally competent' enough to not need media experts to help them.

This goes much further, it could be argued, than Morley, as Fiske seems to be saying that the actual meaning of any programme could be completely different, not just oppositional, negotiated, or dominant. Fiske's argument causes problems for many media researchers as it means that they are almost incapable of discovering how audiences think and behave. Indeed, Fiske often cites the fact that 80-90 per cent of all advertising strategies fail to succeed in bringing in an increase in sales (Fiske 1990), which has led to many people to question the usefulness of New Audience Research. First, there seems to be a great deal of backtracking and shifting over how much meaning should be assigned by the audience and how much on the text amongst its protagonists with disagreements as to how far audiences were interpreting texts through their social backgrounds with Nightingale (1996) pointing out that many later research studies backtracked into textual analysis. Morley (1990) decided to distance himself from Fiske's ideas of a semiotic democracy despite the latter's praise of his Nationwide study. In his article printed in Curran et al (1990), he criticises the lack of power in Fiske's beliefs, stating that it had become too disseminated and lacked ideology. He also commented on the fact that reading texts is not the same as changing the text itself.

Morley (ibid) himself had an argument with his contemporary James Curran, who questions the novelty of New Audience Research and therefore how much it had to add to the discourse. For instance, he cited work completed by a large number of media effects researchers from the 1940s and 1950s,

who studied reception analysis whilst taking into account sociological backgrounds. For New Audience researchers, he argues: “ year AD starts with textual analysis” (ibid p266) in the cultural/literary effects tradition and ignores what went before it. Of Fiske he argues that his ideas were “ old pluralism re-heated” (ibid p267) that simply played into the hands of neo-liberal America, that wanted to deny any sort of hegemonic power in the media. Nightingale (1996) takes this further and comments that news and current affairs programmes and the ideology politics that surrounded them were dropped soon after the Nationwide study for more identity-orientated politics within soap operas making the research far more ‘ populist’. The fact that the research turned the idea of power and ideology away from the media itself is something that Nightingale and many others criticise. Even Morley (1990) acknowledged that it is very well to rip one’s jeans as a sign of resistance; however this is at best a micro-political move of resistance and not one that makes people think twice about buying designer jeans.

Despite these valid criticisms, this essay still maintains that New Audience Research still was revolutionary as it helped a discourse that was very much removed from focusing on the audience as individuals able to make a resistance or re-interpret the media in any way. Morley (cited in Curran et al, 1990) replied to Curran’s argument by saying that he criticised the new research with the gift of hindsight given to him by new audience research’s work, and that none of the previous authors whose work focused on the audience would have been brought to light if it was not for new audience research raising the audience as an issue once again. In this way, a once marginalised area of research reasserted itself into the mainstream. It was,



as Morley (1980) said a 'paradigm shift' in every sense of the word.

Sympathy, too, has to be given to Fiske for his pluralistic vision of semiotics.

It could be argued that he was merely taking Hall's original challenge to its logical conclusion – that it could be hypothesised that Audiences could actually hold a great deal of power. Curran (1990), Nightingale (1996), Eco (1974 cited in Nightingale 1996)) and others all agree that Fiske through his ideas on the active audience and plurality of meaning brought the idea of semiotics to a new generation of researchers, especially in America.

Nightingale (1996, p 58) goes further and argues that New Audience Research was "the point where sociology and semiotics meet in a globally unifying approach to the study of mass communications." Nightingale herself argues that despite the shortcomings, the new wave of Audience research was indeed 'paradigm shift' and created 'a profound reorientation in cultural studies' (ibid, p 60). Her reasoning for this was that studies such as Morley's Nationwide forced researchers to look beyond the passivity of audiences, beyond psychology and/or effects and root the debate within political and sociological discourse. It allowed researchers 'to look beyond the mass' and see the inherent stratification in society (ibid, p 69).

Furthermore, the emphasis on ethnography and qualitative research helped to 'bridge the gap' between researcher and subject (ibid, p 68). In this way researchers now had to acknowledge this dimension of the audience as a major factor in audience research.

In conclusion, despite new audience research's critics saying that that it dissolves the meaning of the text, is not anything new, and individualises and pluralises audience research to a point to where meaning almost

evaporates (Curran p 260), the concept behind it has still proved to be revolutionary. First, it took the discourse of audience studies away from the pessimistic and almost patronising beliefs of Marxists, Leavisites and media effects theorists that saw the audience as a single, passive mass. Instead it made them into active forces of meaning – as Hall maintained. As Morley discovered in his experiment, they did not have to agree with the way mass media encoded the text, they could take various meanings from it depending on a host of background factors. They were an active audience, according to Fiske, who could resist the hegemony of media and create their own readings. It has had a lasting effect on audience research globally, whilst the discourse has moved on, the social, cultural and economic etc' background of an audience is seen as a major component of audience studies research (Jensen et al, 1991).

#### Active audience studies

#### New Influence Research

The evolution of media studies reviewed thus far reveals the distinctions, if not contradictions to the approaches between media effects research and studies exploring active audiences / reception studies. Kitzinger (2004: 24) notes that the polarity between these two media scholarships has split media researchers into two sides, moreover with the existing geographical and cultural borders between which historically underpins media studies framework. Studies emphasising media effects and media power over audiences are more popular in the United States, whereas researchers in the Western Europe are more interested with the way audience use and

meanings of media messages. At some point, this gap continues to widen as researchers focused on the difference, rather than finding a way to bridge media effects and audience studies (Morley, 1998).

Nonetheless, a group of scholars have attempted to revitalise Hall's encoding/decoding theory and try to (re)connect reception studies with media effects studies (for example see reception work conducted by the Glasgow Media Unit, Kitzinger, 2004; and Miller et. al., 1998). These studies revive the approach of Morley's Nationwide research and differentiate themselves from the over-emphasis of audience power in most active audience studies. This approach, also referred as the 'new influence' research acknowledges that the media has some influence towards people and that the focus is to identify what and how audiences interact with these influences. Kitzinger (2002: 276) asserts that the new influence studies has little connection with the hypodemic needle theory and that exploring into the ways audiences interpret media messages will help reveal ways in which media effects actually operates. The new influence research therefore acknowledges some media effects on audiences by theorizing ways in which audience interpret media representations and construct meanings.

Although the impetus of new influence research is to bridge the gap between two major approaches of media research, most empirical work do not necessarily concern to find a link between media and behaviour in any context. In fact studies consistently fail to find a link between these two (Barker and Petley, 1996; Norris et. Al, 1999), and any research hoping to prove such link is doomed to failure (Gauntlett, 1998). On the other hand, the new influence research embraces the different ways audience may

interpret what they see/hear/read in the media and acknowledges the limits of these interpretations, as well as the possibilities for shared mainstream interpretation particularly when dealing with repetitive and relatively closed text (Kitzinger, 1999; Livingstone, 1999). What this suggests is that although people can individually respond actively to the media, their predisposed collective needs, beliefs and interests may influence their response.

### **Media reporting of health and perception of risks**

Seale (220: 25) argues that the ways in which audience understand health issues is complex and involves a process of selecting and constructing unique composition of different health stories through media usage and experience. This process, or 'intertextual experience' as he describes it, should not be overlooked in studies of media and health as audience are not only exposed to a single health story, but interactions of various different health issues across different media. As a result, audience understanding of a particular health issue may (or may not) overlap or influenced by their interpretation of other health stories in the media. Seale therefore believes that when analysing any forms of media