

# Active audiences and the construction of meaning



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Active Audiences & the Construction of Meaning " Media messages are central to everyday lives... Audiences are active interpreters of meaning. " " Audiences interpret media in diverse ways. "(255-256). People in the media industry believe that the audience is a mass of passive readers who accept media messages uncritically.

Nevertheless, the audiences actively take part in the interpretation of media texts which is an essential process when media messages start meaning something to people who assign their own implication to the texts. Sometimes audiences can interpret the message in the same way as intended by the producers, but sometimes they construct meaning that is very different. People interpret media texts in all types of social settings. Therefore, media has become a significant part of the social life.

Since audiences are active receivers of media texts, they can change media messages by collective action such as prohibition of certain media texts, campaigns that show audiences' disapproval of media products, public writing of letters of complaint regarding media, foundation of independent media that criticize main media but also supply audiences with alternative perspectives. Audiences from different races, ethnicities, genders and social classes construct various interpretations of the same media message.

So, media texts are characterized by polysemy, they have multiple meanings. According to John Fiske (1986) there is abundance of meaning embedded in the media texts. Therefore, media messages are structured in a way that enables people to make different readings and interpret them actively, not simply to accept the dominant interpretation. People have agency but there is no structure. However, people from different social

backgrounds construct various interpretations of same media texts. Social statuses shape audience members' viewpoints, interests and attitudes towards media.

As a result, people must be aware of their agency- the opportunity to construct meaning- and of the social constraints as well. People often construct interpretation that is based on widely accepted norms, values and beliefs about the world around us. According to Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model messages are constructed on the basis of specific "codes", encoded by the producers and decoded by the active audience. To decode the media texts, audiences have to know the basic medium conventions and cultural values.

Since media messages draw on some taken-for-granted beliefs and cultural codes, the audience uses its knowledge about them to construct meaning and decode the media texts. This factor hinders us from being fully autonomist. Active audiences use media for diverse reasons and construct different interpretations but the big corporations will always be there to nudge us in certain directions. Fortunately, people like me will often refuse to accept the preferred meaning and develop oppositional reading and resistance, which are related to social action.

Audiences' oppositional decoding is part of the resistance to the traditional roles and rules. People are suppose to use media to relax, fantasize and escape from the social reality or solve some problems and live in harmony not to be subliminally attacked by producer beliefs. Some people experience 'pleasure of resistance' by making interpretations opposing to the dominant meanings. Overall there will always be a give and take between the media

and the people, what we have to remember is we can have control over these media influence as long as we can take a step back and acknowledge their presence.