

Is halls encoding decoding model still useful media essay



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Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse was written by Stuart Hall in 1974, which was critically acclaimed in mass communications research and paved the way for many academics to build upon the theoretical model of encoding and decoding between audience and receiver. Messages are sent and received between the audience and the receiver, but the meaning of the text is dependent on the audience's cultural background, to accept, reject or negotiate the text with a margin of understanding, (Hall: 1974). This analysis of the model of research will examine the usefulness of Hall's theory on contemporary mass communications research, and will follow the next generations of audience research and the application of the model in current media today.

Firstly it is necessary to recognise that the encoding decoding model has much older theoretical roots. One of the main theoretical roots of the model (critical theory) referred to the post 1933 emigration of scholars from the Marxist school of applied Social Research in Frankfurt to the United States (Mcquail: 2000). The school was established to understand the failures of Marxism, and Stuart Hall's essay examined the mass media as central to the culture of capitalism with meaningful discourse, this is relevant to the success of the model which appears critically popular in looking at capitalism with a predominant media.

Secondly the theory readdressed the themes of the Use and Gratifications theory examining audience power over the media rather than mediated effects on the audience (Katz: 1959). The theoretical study later concluded that audiences use the media to fulfil their own needs and gratifications (Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M.: 1974). Hall's theory represents a

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similar model with elegant simplicity, to make it a key text, (Mcquail: 2002). Importantly Hall's model focuses on groups rather than the individual which is more useful for looking at mass communications dominance due to social class and cultural heritage. Both the political and theoretical foundations of the model have implications on its relevance today as its usefulness is paramount to a mass media dominated society and the driving relationship between audience and media.

The model itself described by Hall is,

“ The institution -societal relations of production must pass into and through modes of language for its products to be realised. This initiates a further differentiated moment, in which the formal rules of discourse and language operate. Before this message can have an effect it must first be meaningfully decoded. It is the set of decoded meaning which have an effect, influence entertain, instruct or persuade with complex perceptual cognitive, ideological or behavioural consequences” (Hall, 1974: 3).

Hall (1974) suggests four decoded meanings from this model, the dominant code of preferred meanings, the professional code – transmitting a message signified within in a hegemonic manner, the negotiated code of adapted and oppositional elements and the oppositional code, clear understanding but with a connotative inflection and rejection for audience, (Mcquail: 2002). This segregation of groups was tested by David Morley's The Nationwide Audience in 1980 which complimented Hall's research but importantly gave birth to second generation ethnographic research. This was praised by Morley (1992) where he described how Halls model gave rise to decode

media messages and sparked emphasis toward a new phase of qualitative audience research, gender realities and media consumption.

Ethnographic research predominant in the 80's examined how television was a social resource in family dynamics and the relation of media in everyday life, rather than decoding one programme through a single medium. Fish wrote that "one studies the every day life of a group, and relates the use of (a reception of) a programme or a medium to it" (1979: 329). This quality of research transcends further into areas such as gender and communities in which Hall's model can not disseminate.

Third generation audience research offers a constructionist analysis of contemporary media in the sense of how we are aware and conceive our roles with the audience and reflexivity of our understanding of ourselves as the audience. Radway (1998) emphasized the audience point of departure subjected to television and our self reflection of the media and our knowledgeable participation is where audience research lies. Essentially second and third generation research explored more deeply into social constructivism, which compliments audience media relationships. Although Hall was praised by Nightingale (1996) for the model researched media linguistics and social semiotics to combine research methods and genre in new ways. The audience understanding of linguistics and their self representation through genre is a critical area of contemporary audience research.

After the third generation of audience research, Schroder (1994) described the turn towards ethnography and the everyday, as a threat to write the

media as the focus of research out of existence. Political research addressed later, will demonstrate this to be untrue and encoding/decoding remains useful in social and cultural class on a broad scale.

Nightingale (1996) criticized the model for the assumption that only dominant culture is produced through television and the modernity of the model should recognise the cultural hegemony distributed through society. Fiske (1997) described, the characterization of the television text as a site of a struggle between dominant ideologies working to produce a closed text by closing off the opportunities it offers to resistive readings, and the diversity of audiences who, if they are to make the text popular, are constantly working to open it up to their readings. Audience participation has increased dramatically in contemporary television, addressing the dominant reading and offering opportunities for varied outcomes. The rising popularity of reality TV shows is a good example of a larger audience participation, which will be addressed later on.

Before looking at the changing media landscape and the issues that affect the use of the decoding model in the close present. It is first necessary to pay attention to David Morley. In *The Study of the Nationwide Audience*, Morley (1980) described 'members of a given sub-culture tend to share a cultural orientation towards decoding messages in certain ways, similarly Hall (1981b) described 'individual "readings" of messages will be framed by shared cultural formations and practices' (p. 51). This study used Stuart Hall's encoding model and successfully identified dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings based on cultural background. The limitations of this were later noted by David Morley (1992) in his critical postscript in *Television* <https://assignbuster.com/is-halls-encoding-decoding-model-still-useful-media-essay/>

Audiences and Cultural Studies where he acknowledged his terms of class (middle and lower) are descriptive labels that do not divulge the detailed ethnography of the people studied. He also describes The Nationwide Audience as scratching the surface of cultural practices that could range from religion to biology. Therefore we can acknowledge that the model lacks the detail desired to penetrate the cultural depth of the audience, but the model can disseminate by social and cultural class on a broad scale.

The Nationwide Audience was defined in relation to texts rather than mediums (Holmes: 2005) but audience medium interaction was also examined in Morley's postscript. Critically the audience medium changes the way the audience receives the text. The internet has been the largest rising social medium in contemporary technology and is very different from television. "Television is considered to be an acoustic medium like radio, in which sound represents the privately experienced equivalent of a social world characterized from all directions" (Holmes: 2005, p. 114). The Internet presents a world of information, a virtual reality linked with broadcast networks, interactive communication, and a definitive need for the audience to participate. The internet and online broadcasting were not present at the time of the original study forming an argument that Hall's model is outdated as it does not account for changing mediums and New Media content consumed by the audience.

New genre has allowed reflection on old mediums acquainted to their ontological power (Holmes: 2005). An example is the spectacular increase in active audience participation in reality TV, founded on a principle of imaginary substitution; and audiences viewing a representation of

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themselves. Using Nightingale's assumption that the model assumes only dominant culture is produced through television; reality TV rebuffs a dominant understanding through the audience participation.

Critically as Hall's model arguably only accounts for a dominant ideology, it has extremely limited use in looking at audience participation and influence. The ITV's X factor audience has an estimated 10 million viewers, and there are various reality TV voting shows such as big brother, that aren't just primetime TV, but can dominate the front page of many tabloid magazines reaching a predominantly larger circulation of people than television. Third generation audience research best describes the audience participation, in their active role in the media in determining the outcome of the represented. Social constructivism defines reality TV, and a dominant hegemony is arguable defeated.

Hall's model integrates determination and freedom via the producer and consumer, but arguably disappoints in its linearity. Murdock (1989) criticizes the model's overemphasis of the rational dimension of the response.

Comparing the basic nature of the model to Lasswell's comment (known as the Lasswell model) Who (says) What (to) Whom (in) What Channel (with) What Effect recited before Hall, accounts for the medium and the effects within research, justifiably explaining the linear nature of the encoding model in comparison. Modern communication research needs further consideration of the medium. Although Lasswell's model can be seen as a transmission of communication as opposed to mass communication it is arguably more useful than that of Hall's in allowing for current new media interactivity and the medium. Murdock's description of the overemphasis of unilateral

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response is justifiably irrelevant in large groups, in which it is useful to examine mass communication from a political perspective.

We previously mentioned Hall's model can penetrate social and cultural class on a broad scale and mediated politics can theoretically be applied to the encoding model. The conservative government will have most support from the upper social class; typically bankers and businesses that support the privatization and socio-economic freedom of the individual agreeing with the dominant message delivered through the media. This message would understandably be rejected by trade unionists and the lower class that live in less privileged economic conditions. The middle class's are the negotiable reading, and are essentially the battleground for government votes.

Thatcherism and the conservatives long stint in power from 1979- 1996 can be examined in relation to encoding and decoding the mass audience, similarly to Tony Blair's acknowledgement of the model in Labour's reign from 1997-2010.

During Margaret Thatcher's reign the traditionalist capitalist ideology, family values and patriotism presented through the media were a success in cultural hegemony. It can be argued that Thatcherism was successful due to its ability to address the concerns of ordinary people through its articulation of right wing politics. The study of this is described by Gauntlett (2000) who says " In studying the media and gender, one could use this approach to see how the media might make certain formulations of masculinity, femininity and sexuality to be natural, inevitable and sexy" (p. 30), Certainly Margaret Thatcher's formulation of ideology expressed certain values onto the British public that permeated their culture.

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Recapping on the value of Hall's model in mass communication as a meaningful discourse in capitalist culture, the application to politics and the media is evidence of its use. Hall (1996) also argues Thatcherism successfully maintained support of the working class through popular authoritarianism. It can be seen the British people submitted to the psychological message of the driving capitalist machine and arbitrary nature of political power. The Falklands War is a great example of how the hegemonic embodied populism to remain in power. The ability to be able to look back and examine governmental power, political strategy and articulation of the people is vitally important for understanding the nature of our media, culture and public and can be used by government and historians to shape future policies and projections. A large amount of credit must go to Hall's model that can textualize and open up the coding used between audience and public and represents an important academic angle from which to do so.

Although Stuart Hall's model is based around theories of mass communication, Dicks (2000) applied Hall's encoding/decoding model to a local heritage museum based in South Wales with the understanding that heritage and the museum visitors can be studied as a form of social communication. Heritage is examined as a cultural communicative practise, linked to the vernacular aesthetic of the people. The social model of communication looks at the practises of production and consumption in relation to politics, economics and culture, (drawn from the framework of Stuart Hall). Initially the heritage site, (which was being built in the early 90's) dedicated to the miners' strikes felt the Conservative government had

projected a Disney model of narration to the heritage site that didn't reflect the community feel, thus as local historian was able to get involved in the development process, outlining the encoding element. When the public visited the museum they were asked a series of questions before, and after their interactivity with the museum. Generalising the findings presents Halls's theory in accurate modern context of dominant, oppositional and negotiated responses to the decoding of the information presented due to economic and cultural heritage. However they should not be simplified into this manner as the detail of the answers given, present a larger scope of negotiation from the public, due to the museum not actually presenting a dominant hegemonic view of the miners' strikes. In this sense, the question is how did the visitors negotiate with the negotiation? Essentially using their own social-cultural class to deconstruct the narrative. Concluding the findings of the article, the encoding aspect of the museum content presented a clear divide between the government and local idea of the aesthetic and values of the museum, and decoding is representative of cultural and economic means but does not necessarily descend from hegemonic measures passing scope for more negotiation. The article has clearly used the model to an intelligently critical viewpoint of an audience subject to heritage with large significance thus cementing its usefulness in this element of modern society. If the model can be used to deconstruct our perseverance of heritage and reveal political and cultural means of the audience, it has another credible use. Importantly the model was able to be adapted to reflect more audience freedom and negotiation reflected in contemporary audience theory today.

It is now necessary to revisit many aspects of Hall's model, tying in the theoretical, alongside politics, the changing media landscape and the wider scope of knowledge. Firstly, taking a political stance, the continuities between Thatcherism and New Labour's political projection were documented by Hall (1998), as the authoritarian populism of Britain was echoed in the New Labour rhetoric under Tony Blair. As we previously covered the theoretical roots of the encoding model stem from emigration of scholars from the Marxist school of applied Social Research, and Labour learnt a lot with its affiliation with Marxism. Tony Blair's contribution to the magazine almost certainly contributed to his understanding of how to modernise his party and use the media effectively as a dominant mass communication tool. Where the Use and Gratifications model failed in Marxist academia, Hall's model successfully justifies mass media dominance.

If we revisit the third generation audience research we can see a link between the constructionist viewpoint and the findings from the heritage museum. Participants in the heritage museum research were able to self-identify their role in the research and offer a more negotiated viewpoint, as such there is greater audience understanding of their identity in shaping the outcome, and the ability to use the encoding model with more modern research giving it greater use.

Referring back to Nightingale's criticism of the model, that it assumed only dominant culture is produced through television. The heritage site had no dominant message and yet the model was able to be used to negotiate readings and audience understanding. The model was able to do this

because it still posed relevant for disseminating social and cultural class but <https://assignbuster.com/is-halls-encoding-decoding-model-still-useful-media-essay/>

its real findings and the examination of further audience negotiation compliments its ability to embrace the audience understanding of third generation research.

Whilst it was concluded modern television such as reality TV produced flaws in Hall's model, one would assume there would be new documented research on the progression of New Media and the distribution of programmes through changing mediums and a diverse virtual world of information. There is not such a wealth of information out there which asks larger questions as to whether the encoding/decoding model has been cast aside with changing media dynamics. One of the most important recent media developments is the rise of social media. One of the largest and most predominant media campaigns in western politics was Barack Obama's presidential campaign in 2008. Meerman Scott (2007) believes this was won due to Obama being the candidate that mostly strongly embraced social media. The encoding model does fall short of being able to connect to interactive media, user generated content and networking that is not subject to a mass dominated message, but instead the articulation and communication of many individuals independent of thought. Obama didn't pursue an authoritarian message with his campaign to be mediated across the web, but many individuals wrote multiple blogs raising awareness online.

This has given me the viewpoint that mediated liberalism and the freedom of audience control has rapidly increased due to social media. Hall's model is relevant in predominant media, it will not transcend into the online social forum. Similarly the role that the audience plays online is very much what people do with the media, (echoing the Use and Gratification model) and <https://assignbuster.com/is-halls-encoding-decoding-model-still-useful-media-essay/>

attempts to cast aside dominant ideology or reading. Social Media is technically the most recent revolutionary form of media in which the encoding model appears to fall short in its application of audience understanding. It can however be concluded that there is very little academic research on this topic thus far to determine the model in this form.

Conclusively, Stuart Hall's model has taught me, in regards to politics and the media, it is best applied in context of the media dominance of society and has clear use and purpose in analysing recent UK governments and can contextualise the relationship we have with the autonomous power above us. The model has limited use in modern television such as reality TV and the changing media landscape, and falls short of the social media revolution and the powerful nature of the audience online. The model itself though, does transcend the ethnography and constructionist nature of the research that followed the model, and its ability to be applied to a local heritage site and successfully disseminate an audience, proves it can still be useful in modern society. Similarly the social and cultural decodings of the model in mass audience research have been justified and complimented by various researches undertaken.