

The Television/Audience Complexities: More than Encoding/Decoding

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Review: Hall, Stuart. 2001. "Encoding/Decoding". In Durham, Meenakshi Gigi and Douglass M. Kellner (eds.). *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*. Melden and Oxford: Blackwell.

Hall opened the article with a critique to the classical tradition of mass communication research that looked at the communication process in a linear fashion, with a model of sender/message/receiver. This classical tradition was over concentrated on the message exchange level; excessively behavioristic, in the sense of looking at communication event as solely a stimulus and response phenomenon; and forgets the complexity of the structures that exist in the communication process itself. Hall then suggested a new understanding of the communication phenomenon, especially at the level of mass communication, which is later known as the 'encoding/decoding perspective', in accordance with the title of Hall's article itself.

Encoding/Decoding as New Perspective

Hall has basically followed Marx's idea that every commodity is going through the process of production, circulation, consumption, and reproduction. That is, in a communication event, 'message and meaning' is a commodity, which is produced, distributed, consumed and reproduced. These stages are the moments of communication circulation itself, which each moment has its complex structure and its own modality, but also related to one another to form a circuit as a whole, as 'a complex structure in dominance' (p. 166).

Hall distinguished two moments of communication circuit: encoding and decoding. Encoding occurs when the sender, in this case is television industry, processes event or reality, as the raw material, to be a television program. Hall asserted that reality or event might not be directly displayed as television show. An event should be packed with visual and aural format of television and should be framed as a story with a certain meaning. In other words, reality or event must go through a set of production processes involving certain codes. This encoding process then produces a television show as a 'meaningful discourse' (p.168).

Meanwhile, encoding is the process by which the television program is received and interpreted by the audience. A television program must first be accepted as a meaningful discourse, meaningfully decoded by the audience. Without this interpretation process, we may not be able to talk more about the uses, gratifications, or effects of television program. In this process, audiences will use their own specific codes, which could be same, different, or even contrary to the meaning structure produced by the television industry.

Then, we identified two meaning structures: the first meaning structures are generated in the encoding process, while the second is the result of the decoding process. They could not be viewed as similar, as audiences have their own meaning structures that are relatively autonomous.

Dominant Meaning: Where or Who?

The television sign is complex, composed by the combination of visual and aural signs. Following Peirce, television sign is iconic one, which has some resemblances capacity to the reality represented. At glance, due to the nature of this similarity, iconic sign seems natural, looks like object in the real world, and not involving certain codes. Considering linguistic dichotomy of denotation and connotation, television

sign will appear as merely denotative, with natural and literal notions.

However, according to Hall, the television sign is almost never only denotative sign. Meanwhile, almost all television signs are constituted by the combination of denotative and connotative features. Although seems iconic and looks natural, television discourse is never merely denotative, but always based on the certain codes, presented with specific connotations, and served certain ideologies.

Actually, denotative dimension is not out of ideology, but its ideological meaning is strongly fixed and closed. Therefore, Hall suggested that the analysis of the television signs in order to reveal the ideological discourse, should be emphasized at the level of connotation; because at this level, meaning is relatively open, dynamic, and full of struggle. Quoting Barthes, connotative levels of sign are 'the fragments of ideology' (p. 172). The connotative meaning is always polysemy. There are a variety of connotative meanings, but they are not equal each other. Every culture always has the 'dominant of preferred meanings' (p. 172). It is important to note that this dominant meaning is not 'determined', but obtained with some 'work' or struggle, and therefore can be changed dynamically.

A fundamental question can be proposed here: where do these dominant meanings come from? Who are the

producers of the dominant meanings? Implicitly, Hall has noticed that the television industry can attempt to give the preferred meaning (p. 173). Is it true?

Carefully, we may consider some hypothetical possibilities. First, the dominant meaning is beyond the television industry structure, for example in the hands of state or business corporations; in this condition television shows only become ideological state apparatus or business apparatus (see Althusser 1971: 143; McChesney 2006; Lull 1995: 9-16, 31-38; or Bennett 1982: 287-288). The interconnection between media and economic and political groups are very complex. Classic examples are the support lent by Rupert Murdoch via *The Sun* and *The Times* of London to Thatcher's campaigns in 1998, as well as support to Reagan over the *New York Times* (Bagdikian 2003).

The second possibility, the television institution itself produces dominant meaning predominantly. However, we should add an important note that television institution is not a solid system, which has single objective and interest. In contrast, television industry is a complex structure; there are many tensions, conflicts and contradictions in it, such as conflict of interests between the owners, the clients, the editorial board, the advertising and promotion board, journalists, and others (McQuail 2010: 296-297). So, if the dominant meaning is produced by

television institution, then who is the conductor of this production? Indeed, we should consider the production of dominant meaning as a very complex structure; involving many other important groups, not solely television institution as a single subject.

Three Decoding Positions: Problem of Complexity

At the end section of the article, Hall has mentioned the hypothesis of three decoding positions toward television program (p. 174-176). The first is the dominant-hegemonic position, where the audience codes are similar or equivalent with the sender codes. As a result, the meaning structures of audience tend to be equal with the meaning structures of program producer. The second is negotiated position. It occurs when audiences in certain aspects, usually in the macro or abstract level, agree with the suggested or impressed discourse in the television shows; but in some other aspects, such as in some micro and local sides, they use their own cultural codes. Then, the third is oppositional position; audiences deconstruct the television discourse with their own codes, thus produce opposite meaning to the television meaning structures.

As a hypothesis, these decoding positions were very influential. Admittedly, this article has been acknowledged as one of the precursors of a

new communication research perspective, which focused on audiences as active subject in interpreting television signs. For example, Morley, in his classic study about audience reception of Nationwide, has empirically proved these three decoding positions. This study has shown that decoding position closely related to the audience's social class (Morley & Brunson 1999: 36; Kim 2004).

However, this article has also criticized because it has assumed that the interrelation between audience and television is primarily interpretative relation; how they interpret television signs (contents). Many researchers, especially from the ethnographic tradition, has demonstrated that the audience relation with the television is not only about the content of television, but much more complex than that; it also includes the everyday life relations between individual and television as a material object that usually placed in the family room.

Many studies have been proved that television has several functions, not only because of its content, such as social relations function, family cohesion and intimacy function, or even social prestige function. In many families, the television is usually turned on at evening or night, mainly to invite other family members to sit together. In this practice, the television content is not important, solely becomes the background, because the important matter is strengthening family

relationship (Silverstone 1994: 36; Gauntlett & Hill 1999: 49). Other studies has shown that people usually turned on the television at certain hours simply because of everyday habit, without giving attention to television shows itself, as doing many other activities. To conclude, the relationships between audience and television are very complex, not always based on the television content or interpretation of it. As Certeau (1984: xii) said: "The analysis of the images broadcast by television (representation) and the time spent watching television should be completed by a study of what the cultural consumer 'makes' or 'does' during this time and with these images".

The Politics of Research?

The classical traditions of mass communication research usually regard mass media as powerful institutions persuading powerless audiences with their contents or messages. Even we could not ignore the debate within the classical traditions, especially about the strength of media effect (powerful effect or limited effect); we still have basic notion that media influence its audiences. McQuail has remarked:

Despite the difficulties and the inevitable inconclusiveness, the question of media effects has proved as fascinating and unavoidable for social scientists as it has for the media themselves and the general public. If we did not fundamentally believe the media to