

Understanding Media Communications: The Encoding / Decoding Approach

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National Collaborating Centre
for Healthy Public Policy

*Institut national
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Québec 

Overview of Session

- Introduction
- Classical approaches to media communications
- The encoding / decoding approach
- Practical exercises
- Conclusion



Introduction

- Objectives
 - Illustrate how media products can be interpreted in different ways
 - Provide understanding of different « moments » of communication
 - Provide understanding of how media messages and their interpretation(s) are « socially located »



Introduction

- Understanding media texts
 - What is the meaning of this message?





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TASTES
BETTER



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YOUR MIND AWAY**



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Introduction

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 - What is the meaning of this message?





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la lutte aux
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Classical approaches to media communication

- Communication as a linear process



Classical approaches to media communication

- Communication as a linear process
- « Hypodermic needle theory »



Classical approaches to media communication

- Communication as a linear process

« Magic bullet theory »



Classical approaches to media communication

- Communication as a (relatively) linear process
 - The media « effects » approach
 - The « uses and gratifications » approach



The encoding / decoding approach

- Elements of context
 - 1960s /70s Britain / British academia
 - Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (The « Birmingham School »)
 - Culture, politics, and communication
 - Stuart Hall
 - Encoding /decoding



The encoding / decoding approach

- Turning point in media communication theory
- Conclusive break with
 - Dominant (American) models
 - Aesthetics
 - Idea of audiences as passive consumers



The encoding / decoding approach

- Every « moment » in the process of communication has its own determinants
 - Encoding (the original composition of the message)
 - Decoding (the point at which the message is « read » and understood)



The encoding / decoding approach

- Production and consumption are determined by a range of influences:
 - Discourses of the medium
 - Discursive contexts of composition and consumption
 - Technologies used

There is nothing natural about communication



The encoding / decoding approach

There is nothing natural about communication

- Messages have to be constructed before they can be sent
- Construction and reception are active, social events



The encoding / decoding approach

- The audience is not a single undifferentiated mass
 - There is bound to be a lack of fit between some aspects of production and reception of messages



The encoding / decoding approach

- Potential for misunderstanding is limited by communication systems
 - Many « codes » used in media messages appear to be natural because they have become completely normalized



The encoding / decoding approach

« *French aircrash disaster inquiry shock* »



The encoding / decoding approach

- Messages are polysemic, but not totally pluralistic
 - Not predetermined, but composed within a system dominated by accepted codes
 - Dominant meanings are « preferred »



The encoding / decoding approach

- « Encoding » media messages attempts to set up some of the limits of interpretation
 - Works to enforce and command the « dominant » understanding of the message



The encoding / decoding approach

- Three « hypothetical » positions from which media texts can be understood
 1. Dominant / « preferred » position
 2. Negotiated position
 3. Oppositional position





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