Understanding Media Communications: The Encoding / Decoding Approach

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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?
IT’LL BLOW YOUR MIND AWAY

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Introduction

• Understanding media texts
  – What is the meaning of this message?
CHOQUANT?
Pour les homophobes!

Journée nationale de lutte contre l’HOMOPHOBIE
4 juin 2003

De la tolérance à l’acceptation
www.homophobie.org

Institut national de santé publique
Québec

Centre de collaboration nationale sur les politiques publiques et la santé
National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy
Classical approaches to media communication

- Communication as a linear process

Sender ➔ Message ➔ Receiver
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
ERROR: stackunderflow
OFFENDING COMMAND: ~
ERROR: stackunderflow