

Reappraising Reception: Aims, Concepts and Methods

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The rise of 'reception studies' has become a familiar theme in assessments of the international media research of the last decade (see, for instance, Levy and Gurevitch (eds), 1994). Put concisely, 'reception studies' are a particular kind of audience research, distinctive in the amount of interest they show in questions to do with the symbolic and discursive organization of media output and those processes of meaning production by which understanding, significance and pleasure are generated. In this chapter, I want to examine what reception analysis involves, consider some of the main problems which it has encountered and assess its development as an essential component of media inquiry.

In its main preoccupations and guiding concepts, reception analysis emerged from within the cultural studies approach to media analysis, but it quite decisively moved that approach out from an earlier focus on content and form to an engagement with interpretation and context. It also re-engaged cultural studies, albeit obliquely and often nervously, with some of the classic themes and methodologies of the social science tradition of media research, connecting questions of 'power' with questions of 'use' and employing empirical research tools in the attempt to locate both within those various settings of everyday modernity in which media meanings get made. Most versions of the 'rise of "reception"' tell it as a story of progress, of research development, perhaps even of a breakthrough in our understanding of how the media work. This is a justified emphasis, as I shall show, but there are also signs that such research is now facing uncertainty as to how best to develop and connect itself to other aspects of media inquiry. This uncertainty is accompanied by a more strongly critical appraisal of the early studies.

My primary aim, then, is to identify as clearly as I can the principal aims, concepts and methods of the short but influential tradition of reception analysis, and then to illustrate these by reference to studies which seem to me not only to be interesting in themselves but also to be usefully indicative of broader tendencies and issues. A number of problems will be identified on the way and, at the end, some of the implications for future work sketched out. I am assuming a student reader aware of the area but still able to profit from an

exposition. More knowledgeable readers may nevertheless derive some interest from comparing my synopsis with their own views.

'Reception' as Cultural Analysis: Origins

Although reception analysis is now an established part of interdisciplinary media research, there is little doubt that it was from within the British 'school' of cultural studies, with its 1970s base in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, that many of the formative ideas emerged (Brattinger, 1990, and McGuigan, 1992, provide useful contextualization). This is not to overlook the very long social science tradition of researching the 'uses' and 'influences' of media by direct investigation of viewing, listening and reading groups (see McQuail, 1994, for an overview). Nor is it to ignore those developments in literary theory which have put an emphasis upon 'reading' and upon the aesthetic and psychological factors involved in interpreting literary texts. Both these areas of work have variously informed reception study (or been the subject of its critical scrutiny) whilst remaining largely distinctive in their primary concerns.

During the 1970s, work at the Birmingham Centre had, under the directorship of Stuart Hall, moved further away from its origins in literary cultural criticism towards a more politicized analysis of capitalist culture. For its 'macro' theories this analysis drew extensively on structuralist Marxism (notably via Althusser, 1971) while for its study of cultural products it was influenced strongly by the complementary ideas of semiotics (grounded in the work of de Saussure, 1974). The result was an intensive focus on how media forms and meanings contributed to the reproduction of ideology and thereby served to sustain the relations of inequality and of oppression upon which the capitalist economic system depended. 'Ideology' was itself the subject of lengthy definitional dispute, but what the term pointed to was the largely hidden patterns of meaning and value which, it was claimed, served to make what might seem to be 'politically innocent' cultural forms (e.g. a newspaper travel feature, a film comedy, a sports bulletin) into communications uncritically supportive of existing systems of power.

Such an approach in part reflected structuralist-influenced work going on elsewhere in the humanities and social sciences, where links between language and politics and between culture and power were being newly explored. Unlike much social scientific analysis, it was an approach which registered the complexity and the multilayering of images and words and accorded discourse a *constitutive* importance – it was not to be seen as simply *expressing* (correctly or otherwise) pre-existing social reality, it was an important part of the fabric of that reality. Indeed, the formation of individual identity was itself largely seen to be a product of representation.

The view of media-audience relations which followed from structuralist Marxist theory was one often trading heavily on assumptions. Compared with the new 'ideology critique', researchers in the social science tradition may often have had some rather crude ideas about what 'influence' was, but they usually went to considerable efforts in attempting to check things out from the

point of view of audience members themselves. However, since by definition much of what happened to people during the processes of ideological reproduction was something of which they were *unaware*, it was not easy for research interested in these processes to use the questionnaire and survey methods which had become established in conventional audience research.

Although some commentators have tended to exaggerate the theoretical and methodological originality of his work by failing to see it in proper context, there is no doubt that David Morley, in the mid-1970s a research student at the Birmingham Centre, was the person who decisively pushed things on. The research which he conducted for his study of the TV news magazine *Nationwide* (Morley, 1980) is usually cited as the 'milestone' here, but in fact the key ideas behind this were published in a working paper six years earlier (Morley, 1974). As a newly appointed teacher of communication studies, I well remember reading this paper shortly after its publication and being impressed and excited by its commitment to opening up *empirically* the question of how the ideological effects of media output were or were not secured. The paper undertook to 'reconceptualize' the media audience both in relation to the unsatisfactoriness of current ideological analysis and the inability of social science research to engage with questions of meaning. Ranging suggestively across a number of studies of class, meaning and power (including those of the sociolinguist Basil Bernstein) and drawing on Stuart Hall's emerging ideas about 'encoding' and 'decoding' relationships in media communication, it put forward the case for 'mapping' the audience by adopting some of the principles of *ethnography* – that is to say by giving serious address to the detail and the contexts of ordinary people's engagement with television. Ethnography is a key component of anthropological studies, but it is worth noting that ethnographic work on British cultural groupings was also a feature of the work of the Birmingham Centre at the time, being developed alongside the more text-based studies on the media (e.g. Willis, 1977). It is also worth noting the extent to which Morley's version of media semiotics (informed by the ideas not only of Hall but of European writers who had commented on the 'textual codes' of the media, such as Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco) was a version in which *meaning was contingent upon interpretation*. That is to say, analyzing 'reception' was not to be a matter of checking out whether or not audience members had managed to 'get the meaning' of items but, instead, a matter of looking at *the different meanings* which they constructed *from* items. Such an emphasis considerably loosened up the model of ideological communication. The conventional model was one of communication, leading to the (rather limited) question of whether or not, and how, these features actually impacted, unconsciously or otherwise, on audience members. The general working assumption among many marxist researchers was that, on the whole, they had a considerable impact. The new model, giving emphasis to the interpretive work of audience members, introduced considerable disjunction and variety between what happened at the 'encoding' stage and subsequent 'decoding' practices. Here, ideological transmission seemed a good deal more a 'hit and miss' affair. As I shall draw out more fully later, this shift was to have important general implications for ideas about media power.

In his *Nationwide* study, Morley gave these ideas application. He took the 'question of ideology' as it related to the complexities of news signification and engaged directly with the matter of just how sample audiences understood and evaluated what they saw and heard. He did the latter by convening what were, in effect, 'focus groups' – a method which, in its basic format, had already been extensively used both in social science and in market research. Small groups of people were brought together to view and then discuss media materials. The researcher chaired the session, raising questions and pursuing follow-up queries. The sessions were taped and the transcripts were the subject of interpretation by the researcher, who sought to identify diagnostically the assumptions and associations at work in respondent accounts as well as noting their explicit descriptions and assessments. This diagnostic element (imputing underlying interpretative positions to viewers; ones which were neither articulated nor, perhaps, even available to consciousness) gave the project an extra element of methodological risk-taking, in addition to the more familiar problems of sociological sampling and data categorization. However, it was a necessary and productive part of the attempt to reconnect developing theories about media meaning and the reproduction of power relations with actual, situated instances of viewing and interpretation.

Morley's work has acted as the single most important point of reference for the 'reception studies' strand of inquiry. Although development has often proceeded by critique (e.g. Lewis, 1983; Dahlgren, 1988; Jensen, 1990; Corner, 1991; Moores, 1993), a process which Morley himself has encouraged and even contributed to (Morley, 1992), the basic ideas which he applied in the *Nationwide* study exert a continuing influence upon research. This is so even though the core of Morley's approach – a sense of the ideological function which television performs – has either been radically transformed or marginalized in much current work, a point I shall return to later.

An Outline of the 'Reception' Perspective

Having established something of the context of the 'reception' approach, and indicated some of the founding ideas behind it, I now want to look in more detail at what it entails. As I have suggested, there has been a great variety of theories and methods concerned with reception, but it is still possible to offer some preliminary generalizations. These I shall treat under three subheadings – aims, concepts and methods.

a) Aims

In looking at the aims of reception studies, at the academic or 'applied' ends which they are supposed to serve, it may be useful to distinguish between two broad categories of study. In an earlier article (Corner, 1991), I termed these categories the 'public knowledge' project and the 'popular culture' project. The 'public knowledge' project involves a primary concern with the production and dissemination of information throughout a society. News, current affairs and documentary-style programmes are key categories here, though by

no means the only ones. Research tends to be focused on specific themes (e.g. war coverage, economic news, policy issues and realms of public concern such as health). The treatment tends naturally to have a strongly cognitive character; that is, it is concerned with what people know and how they know it. Book length studies would include Morley (1980), Jensen (1986), Corner et al. (1990), Livingstone and Lunt (1994).

Those working within the terms of the 'popular culture' project are primarily concerned with the patterns of tastes and pleasures to be found in contemporary media output and use, and with how these patterns connect with more general factors to do with wealth, social class and the variables of disposition and opinion. A far broader range of media products is included here, with considerable importance being given to dramatic and entertainment genres. Though a concern with 'social knowledge' may be present too, the primary aim is to find out what people like and why. Book length studies here would include Radway (1984), Ang (1985), and Press (1991).

When noting this differentiation, it is also important to register the interconnection between public information and popular culture, especially as a number of researchers and research teams are actively interested in both (e.g. Liebes and Katz, 1990; Livingstone, 1991; Schlesinger et al., 1992; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). Certainly, there is a shared concern with the way in which power relations are reproduced through mediated meanings, and it may be that the broad theoretical framework and elements of research method are held in common too. However, despite this, a distinction of the kind I have suggested certainly shows itself in the recent history of reception research. Pursued too emphatically, to mutual exclusion, it undoubtedly has the effect of reducing the richness and intellectual reach of analysis; but some allowance for divergent concerns may be a necessary prerequisite for achieving optimum linkage.

With this in mind, I want to suggest that there are three main aims which have been variously pursued by reception researchers. These are: 1) confirmation of the effective transmission of dominant political and cultural values; 2) the 'counter-evidencing' to this of levels of immunity and/or resistance among audiences; and 3) the indication of complexity and variety in the production of mediated meanings.

It is worth pointing out straightaway that work taking the third line of approach can quickly seem rather lacking in point unless it connects itself to one of the first two perspectives or becomes an element in some other conceptualized scheme of research (for instance, on 'comprehension', on 'knowledge', on 'mediation') of a kind which, I shall indicate later, is now emerging in media studies. It is also worth pointing out that these aims indicate only the underlying hypotheses upon which investigations are pursued. Although there has often been vigorous debate about the way in which these hypotheses might or might not have affected the 'findings' of audience research, there are numerous instances of reception researchers *not* quite finding out what they expected to and, indeed, sometimes having radically to revise their ideas as a result.

1) Propagation of Dominant Values

As I noted earlier, the concept of 'ideology' has been central to a concern with the media as acting in the interests of the powerful by disguising, displacing

or mystifying political and social inequalities. The questions posed for research then become ones about the 'reproduction' of ideology – how its effects are exerted upon media readerships and audiences, who ostensibly attend to the media of their own free will and derive their 'own' pleasures and understandings from so doing. The most direct and crude theory of ideological reproduction has often been called the 'false consciousness' theory. From this point of view, people are essentially to be seen as the dupes of the media's strategies of misinformation and beguilement. Certain ways of looking at the world and of evaluating it are virtually 'implanted' in them by the sheer representational pervasiveness and energy of media portrayal. If we want a solution to the apparent paradox whereby people seem to acquiesce in political and social systems which confine them to economic and cultural inequality, then, the argument goes, we need look no further than this. The media in many countries are often perceived as no more than gigantic ideological machines, serving very effectively to regulate the production of opinion and sentiment in the audience/public, whilst preserving the appearance of freedom and choice.

For a reception researcher, one big problem with such a view is the way in which it presumes a largely passive, victimized audience, rather gullibly replicating 'top-down' messages. A more interactive perspective seems warranted by any approach which takes serious account of interpretation and its varied sourcing. From this perspective, the question would be: 'Given that people work to make meanings from what they see and hear using their various interpretative schemas, how is it that what they finally end up making is so often conducive to maintaining inequalities and is so often antagonistic to clear, critical analysis of the way things are?' There are a number of assumptions made here, perhaps the biggest of which is indicated by that 'so often': but as a hypothesis with which to enter a phase of reception study, variants of this question have been widely used and continue to inform work in the area. The broader concern with the social distribution of interpretative schemes and frameworks of understanding fits in better with theories, such as those of Antonio Gramsci about 'hegemony' (Gramsci, 1968), which attempt a more subtle explanation than 'false consciousness' affords of just how the political regulation of meaning and value is achieved at specific historical moments. Theories of 'hegemony', about the complexity of the competing social forces out of whose competition and combination a (temporary) dominance is achieved by one group, necessarily register not only control but also resistance and opposition as part of their interactive view. When the emphasis given to the latter outweighs that given to the former, then reception studies shift to what I regard to be a different general aim.

2) Counter-evidencing of Immunity/Resistance

This more recent goal of reception studies, arising partly out of perceived problems (theoretical and empirical) with the one discussed above, places its emphasis with a significant difference. Rather than positing an audience politically and culturally victimized by the strategic appeal of the media, and then seeking to determine the limits of this process, it suggests not only that things are more complex but that they are a good deal healthier. Either through a *scepticism* or an active *opposition* to certain dominant media

formats or political/cultural values (most likely a mix of both), audiences are hypothesized to be subjecting media output to a whole range of interpretative transformations. Some of these are self-consciously applied, others not, but the overall tendency is to 'block' any processes of reproduction. On this view then, one which stresses a degree of *audience independence* and perhaps draws on a modified hegemonic theory (see above) to do so, media do not achieve anything like ideological control. Just *how much* control they do achieve, over whom and how, then become important questions, requiring empirical attention (though not necessarily always getting it!).

Another significant question raised here concerns how far the media are seen to be *attempting* social control and for *what* reason. For to note that control is not being achieved *assumes* that it is being tried for.

Within some 'counter' studies (see Fiske, 1987) assumptions about the control dimension of media culture itself are considerably modified so that media messages are regarded to be far less homogeneously 'bad' in their broad political character than theories of ideology routinely suggest. Mixed among the 'bad' elements, even within the same programme or item, there are seen to be many other elements whose implications for politics and for culture are either far less easy to judge or which are reckoned to have an emancipatory, democratic dynamic. They are, in fact, 'good' elements. Again, just what the mix is assumed to be has important consequences for whatever general evaluations emerge from this kind of perspective, which should not be confused with those ideas, outlined above, emphasizing the resistance of the audience to an output seen essentially as manipulative in intent and 'bad' in orientation. When taken together with ideas about immunity and resistance, however, such a view clearly (and sometimes radically) brightens up the picture.

3) Indications of Complexity

Work aiming primarily to show the complexity of reception processes only carries any force when placed against theories taking a more simple view. Since, in the last few years, there has been a refinement of ideas in audience research, it is no longer really enough just to point to variety and complexity (for instance, among audience responses to news programmes or for soap operas), thereby disengaging inquiry from questions about the social relations in which the media are embedded. Nevertheless, many recent studies of reception (including those undertaken for postgraduate qualification) appear, if only in part, to have become a little becalmed intellectually as refinement of the analytic engagement with local data has displaced an interest in the more general social *consequences* of the interpretative process. The semi-institutionalizing of 'audience studies' as a distinct sub-branch of media research, with its own agenda, has perhaps contributed to this unfortunate tendency.

These three aims represent what I see as the main strands of reception research to date, but there has also been a vein of work much more concerned with investigating 'comprehension' than investigating either influence, resistance or complexity and variety on their own. Questions of a psychological or socio-psychological character have often been important in setting the agenda here (Højter, 1990; Livingstone, 1991). In recent studies, question of com-

prehension have been taken up within reformulated perspectives on influence. These perspectives do not work either within the terms of ideological reproduction or of ideological resistance, though they connect with some of the concerns expressed by such notions. The aims are much more to do with tracing the character of mediation and the role of the media in the construction of public knowledge, disposition and attitude, often in relation to specific themes (e.g. Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Corner et al., 1990; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). Such an approach registers the importance of work developing outside of media studies on the conditions of 'common knowledge' (Neumann et al., 1992). It might be useful, following sociological precedents, to regard this emerging perspective as a very openly 'constructionist' one, seeking to explore empirically the processes and conditions by which knowledge-making through the media is achieved. This takes complexity for granted but attempts to retain a hold on questions of 'influence' (for a review of various formulations, see Corner, 1995), pushing these questions well beyond the dichotomy of power/resistance.

b) Concepts

There have been two main areas of conceptual focus in reception analysis, both of them carrying implications for the questions of power which I discussed above. There has been an attempt to theorize the *interpretative process* in a way which gives due attention both to the signifying force of media forms and to audience activity, and there has been an attempt to theorize the *social relations of interpretative difference* in a way which places that difference in the context of a coherent general account of social structure and social action. A number of terms have been coined to help thinking in both these areas. In what follows I shall concern myself only with those which seem to me to have been influential or useful (unfortunately, not at all the same thing!).

The idea of 'decoding' was most widely used in the first phase of reception analysis in Britain. This term was essentially a usage drawn from the notion of 'code' in semiotics. Hall (1973) offered the most influential and widely cited account of 'encoding/decoding' processes, but Eco (1972) had drawn attention to decoding differences too, and the need to research them in empirical inquiry. The problem with 'decoding', now widely acknowledged (see Hall, 1994) is that it suggests a relatively straightforward, single-stage process by which media depictions are translated into meaning. Acts of interpretation do not have this kind of unity, however; they are multi-levelled and anything but straightforward. Talking of 'decoding' an item of foreign news or a situation comedy risks radically oversimplifying how communication works. One of the factors it is likely to ignore is the difference between arriving at an understanding of what a particular media item means and giving that knowledge a significance in the context of previous knowledge, attitudes and dispositions. Variations between individuals are likely to occur in respect of both these activities but a variation in understanding is not the same thing as a variation in assessment and response and it does not carry the same implications for a political and social analysis. In some research, the rather fuzzy use

of the term 'ideology' often acted to block researchers from recognizing the need for more differentiation here.

A related kind of problem has appeared in the extensive use of the term 'polysemy'. Again, this is a usage drawn from European semiotics. However, within British cultural studies it was used first in the early papers by Hall, including the highly influential 'encoding/decoding' paper (Hall, 1973). The term indicates the way in which media items are open to different interpretations; it is yet another notion which pulls away from the older, 'closed', linear view of communication as involving a determinate meaning which is 'transmitted', no matter how accurately or not it is received. Here, the problem has been a slippage from the idea of a putative openness, the specific limits on which empirical research then needs to specify (e.g. what different meanings in *this* case, for *whom*, under *what* circumstances?) towards an openness which remains generalized – a potential indeterminacy in all communication. The problem with this 'unclosed' view of things is that it is likely to become far too optimistic about the real range of options and variations which actually occurring public communication can support (see, for instance, discussion in Lewis, 1983; Condit, 1989; Corner, 1991; Morley, 1992; Livingstone, 1994).

The notion of 'preferred reading', much discussed in the literature, was an attempt to conceptualize the relationship between potential openness and real closure in meaning production. Again, it was a term influentially developed in Hall's early papers (for instance, in Hall, 1973). Hall's argument was that, although there were, indeed, a number of ways in which an item of media output *might* be interpreted, in fact there was one way which was actually 'preferred' by the textual organization itself. This was a way in line with the interests and values of dominant economic and political power. It could not be guaranteed that audiences 'took' this meaning (as I have noted earlier, Hall was keen to break with any idea of linear flow) but it might be expected to exert considerable pressure on interpretative action. Once again, the term fell foul of the complexities attending any study of meaning. Radical semioticians (e.g. Lewis, 1983) asked how it could possibly be established that a 'preferred reading' (or 'preferred meaning') inhered in media material itself, given that meaning was to be seen as a product of interpretative action. Even if it was pointed out that media output contained the cues, the signifiatory data, for such interpretative work (which is, of course, the case) this still left the question begged as to how one particular 'reading' of these cues and data could be established above others. Furthermore, it often seemed that the term 'preferred reading' really pointed to something like 'latent ideological message' rather than anything to do with interpretation of the explicit visual and verbal content of the communication (a scene in a soap opera, say, or an item in a current affairs programme). As in thinking about 'decoding' and 'polysemy', usage of 'ideology' often contributed to the confusion over 'preferred meaning', blurring together the literal and the figurative, the explicit and the implicit dimensions of communicative/interpretative activity.

Put like this, many of the concepts of reception research appear to have been rather unsatisfactory, with few of them surviving sustained critical scrutiny. Allowing for the fact that the research strength of certain studies which used these concepts is partly responsible for showing up their limita-

tions, I think that this is, indeed, the case. The most recent work in the field has found it largely necessary to distance itself from earlier conceptualization, whilst acknowledging the value of at least some of the inquiries informed by it. I shall attempt to assess possibilities for the future at the end of this article.

The second area attracting conceptual interest has been the classification of interpretative variety and the causal connections which interpretation has with broader social factors. As so often, Hall was a major influence. He drew on a basic typology of political meaning-systems suggested by the sociologist, Frank Parkin (1971). In Hall's version (1973), this typology consisted of three categories, Dominant, Negotiated and Oppositional. In a self-evident way, these pointed to the broad possibilities for 'top-down' public communication. It is either received within the dominant terms (the 'preferred reading', an example of successful ideological closure), is negotiated in relation to other values and ideas held by the receiver (some parts are 'accepted', others not), or directly contested in relation to other ideas and values. It was this scheme which David Morley attempted to carry through into his *Nationwide* study (1980). Although he found it useful as a guideline, he also recognized its mixture of vagueness and rigidity. Later critics have often pointed to the problems of having a category called 'negotiated' (aren't all interpretations in some respects negotiated?) and of determining precisely what is to count as 'oppositional' (*only* readings which self-consciously 'oppose' at the level of values and ideas that which they have construed as the *intended* meanings of the item?). Without further comment, we can see the conceptual mess which arises here as a result, once again, of the apparent inability of much work using the term 'ideology' to think clearly about the full range of factors involved in meaning-making.

That the various interpretations made by audience members were not purely individualistic but had a strong group character was a necessary factor in any sociological perspective on 'reception' and a precondition of any attempt to explain *why* interpretative variation occurred. The classification of variety raises a number of problems, however. Although factors of class, race, gender and age are likely to bear on the reasons why people interpret things differently, it is far too crude to use them on their own as designations (e.g. classifying interpretations as 'working-class', 'female' or 'youth'). Morley himself was very aware of the way in which other economic, cultural and socio-biographical factors cut across these categories, sometimes heavily mediating their influence.

Specific research projects have mostly constructed their categorizations in respect of the topic under research (e.g. to include both nuclear workers and environmentalists in the case of research on the safety of nuclear power (Corner et al., 1990); to include women who have suffered violence in real life in the case of research into depictions of sexual violence (Schlesinger et al., 1992). However, this 'narrow' approach to category development is not without its problems (just how homogeneous might nuclear workers be in their attitudes towards the industry?) and it leaves the broader political and social questions about interpretation relatively unaddressed.

Notions such as 'interpretative community' or 'reading formation' have been used in the attempt to connect with the wider social and cultural pattern (see Fish, 1980; Bennett and Woollocott, 1987) but these imprecise terms are

the subject of continuing debate (see Schroder, 1994). Precisely how an 'interpretative community' is identified in respect of its interpretative resources and its material social positioning raises the problem that we can all be said to be members of a number of *different* such communities (of income level, of occupation, of region, of class, of leisure interest, etc.). This means that the notion is very much a relative one - which must be referenced in relation to those particular types of media product and/or mediated themes the reception of which is under inquiry. It has been argued that the idea of 'reading formation' at least acknowledges the extent to which interpretative subsystems are subject to social change and are not to be seen as the stable properties of particular groups. While this may be true, it seems to me to have the effect of creating an even more diffuse context within which to plot the social determinants of reception. Again, I shall take account of possible developments at the end of this chapter.

c) Methods

Given the difficulties I have noted above with theories and concepts, it follows that the question of what methods to use in investigating reception will itself be a fraught one. The very idea of reception study requires that audiences be asked questions, general or specific, about their viewing and that the responses to these questions be analyzed for indications as to the kind of interpretative 'moves' made and, if possible, the links between these 'moves' and other features of respondents' social position and social consciousness. But how to do this?

The first issue concerns the selection of respondents and the mode of inquiry used to elicit information from them. There has been considerable debate over the relative merits of using individuals and groups (see Lewis, 1984; Richardson and Corner, 1986). Interpretations do not lose their 'social' character as a result of being offered in individual interview but the dynamics of group comment allow in general for a more expansive discourse, including the expression of disagreement. Groups, however, do not so easily allow the asking of follow-up questions to one speaker and their interpersonal dynamics may also cover some differences and heighten others (see Richardson and Corner, 1986; Brunt and Jordin, 1988). With both individuals and groups, questions are raised about the kinds of social categories which are, first of all, used to define them and then perhaps used as a route to explaining the social origin of their accounts. I have already referred to the problem of taking small groups, assembled for research purposes, as representative of broad social categories, thereby blocking the recognition of certain points of convergence and variation lying outside these categories. This problem has attracted a good deal of concern (e.g. Lewis, 1984; Brunt and Jordin, 1988; Richardson and Corner, 1986; Seiter et al., 1989), with the relative merits of preconstituted and researcher-constituted groups being debated. Clearly, respondents retain many elements of their primary social identity no matter what the specific physical and social context within which inquiries take place - in their home or in a university office; on their own or in a group; with those they know well or with strangers. However, making allowance for

the variables introduced by the way in which the research collects its evidence is vitally important.

A number of researchers have questioned the use of the 'experimental' research design in which sample viewers are shown taped material shortly before questioning and/or discussion. This has been seen to put an unacceptable level of distortive pressure on the way in which interpretations are arrived at. Nevertheless, some such method is virtually the only way of taking the analysis down to the level of specific communicative instances and the organization of image and speech within these. To move towards a more 'naturalistic' research setting is certainly to move closer to the kind of ethnographic practices of anthropology (where, typically, the researcher spends a lengthy period of time closely observing, and talking with, researched subjects 'on their own ground') but there are some important questions of media/audience interaction which then become unaddressable in this wider research context. I have noted elsewhere (Corner, 1991) how the term 'context' is inclined towards infinite stretch in reception studies and how it covers both matters of time and place as well as matters of 'mental context' (the particular ideas, assumptions and associative schemas brought to bear in interpretation). This presents reception researchers with a need to decide, if only provisionally, *which* particular aspects at *what* level of generality they wish to make their primary focus. In the course of research, changes can be made either by choice (other factors seem more interesting) or necessity (those initially chosen prove unproductive or unresearchable). Only through such a self-conscious closure of initial research design, and then its development in practice, can adequate levels of analytic reliability and clarity be sustained.

A final methodological issue to note here is the question of how respondents' accounts should be used to provide *evidence* of interpretation. The temptation to select 'telling quotes' from the range of speech transcribed is only too obvious. Not only does this run the classic risk of simply confirming researcher hypotheses but it is also likely to ignore the possibility of inconsistency and contradiction in the accounts of individual respondents, never mind about inconsistencies and contradiction between group members. Despite the requirements of space, the citing of as complete a transcript as possible provides the only useful guard (and only then a partial one) against selectivity and analytic skew. However, the use of computer-applied controls on data selection and citation can also radically improve consistency and reliability. For instance, by subjecting the whole of the data collected to a systematic analysis in relation not only to frequency counts but also to positioning variants (e.g. location of given factors in overall response, co-occurrence with other factors) the worst pitfalls of impressionism and circularity can be avoided. This need not impede at all the proper use of research imagination. In addition, it is essential for researchers to show themselves to be fully aware of the special circumstances in which the speech they collect is produced and the different functions it may serve for speakers other than simply 'reflecting' their views.

One of the most important recent developments in reception research methodology has been the introduction of various forms of practical exercise into respondent group sessions. These have either required listing

or sorting exercises to be carried out in a way which allows schemas and categories to be assessed in *application* (Philo, 1990; Buckingham, 1993) or they have involved simulated editing and news writing, allowing awareness and response to show itself in the ability to construct (sometimes imitative, sometimes alternative) accounts (see McGregor and Morrison, 1995). Not all research foci lend themselves to this kind of exploration and such intensive methods need particular care in the securing of validity (and generalizability) for their findings, but the benefits of these approaches as a complement to more conventional methods are likely to be increasingly recognized.

Public Information and Popular Culture: Two Case Studies

I have covered a wide range of themes above, more than enough to suggest that reception studies are a challenging, problematic but also very important — one might say unavoidable — area of contemporary media research. Of course, it is in the interconnection of theory, concepts and methods within any one piece of research that the real work of inquiry begins and the true character of the problems and possibilities emerges. With this in mind, I want to look at two widely cited studies which I have found particularly interesting, both in developing my own research and in teaching reception studies to undergraduate and postgraduate students. These studies have common elements, but they work with what are finally very different agendas, pushing out to catch at distinctive aspects of the relationship between the representations of television and the realm of everyday life. The first is a tightly focused inquiry into how viewers interpreted one edition of a nightly news programme; the second is a broader case study, now something of a classic in the field, of the kinds of engagement and response elicited by the internationally successful soap opera of the 1980s, *Dallas*. In considering them, I shall make use of my subdivisions — theory, concepts and methods — before offering a more general assessment of their findings.

1) Justin Lewis — 'Decoding Television News'

Lewis' study (1984) is a remarkably intensive investigation into the reception of just one television programme — an edition of ITN's *News at Ten*. It sets out to register variations in 'decoding' and to connect these with what are perceived to be points of communicative ambiguity or uncertainty in the news programme itself.

a) Theory

Lewis is keen to start with the accounts of viewers rather than with analysis of output. He regards research which proceeds the other way as too likely to let its own 'reading' obstruct or skew a clear sense of what comes through from respondents. He shows himself to be very aware of the limitations of reception analysis:

I should point out at this juncture that audience research can never hope to reveal the length and breadth of the meaning systems (or extra-textual contexts) used

when someone watches a T.V. programme. These involve a variety of assumptions, from the meaning of particular camera shots to general conceptions about the way the world works.

(p. 20)

With this in mind, his attention is directed towards the most specific kind of 'sense' got from the news items. Since his focus is on the processes of sense-making from television rather than on the substantive issues and values mediated in the reports, he also largely ignores the question of 'ideological reproduction' and the attendant requirement to relate interpretative variations to data about the political and social position of respondents. Too neat a disengagement here raises problems (don't people's political dispositions have a bearing on how they *comprehend* news as well as how they *respond* to it?), but it provides Lewis with a research frame refreshingly free of the assumptions and confusions often found in ideological analysis (see above). His focus on the sense-making activities of viewers, precisely because it is so particularistic, is then correlatable to specific formal features of the news broadcast — its presenter introductions, its mix of speech and image, its sequence of shots, the accounts from location reporters, the way the item is concluded, etc. So Lewis' ideas about public communication, though they start off with questions about viewing activity, return to an engagement with message structure.

b) Concepts

Given his 'reconstructive' approach to analysis, working back from the meanings which respondents gave to what they saw and heard rather than attempting to assess whether or not certain meanings were 'transmitted', Lewis employs a number of terms to conceptualize the processes involved. Two of these — 'lexia' and 'theme' — are especially interesting, not only because of their level of originality but because they indicate Lewis' commitment to studying the interpretation process in as close detail as possible. The term 'lexia' is drawn from Barthes' literary criticism (Barthes, 1975) but Lewis uses it to suggest the basic units of meaning out of which a news item's sense is constructed by viewers. This unit is viewer-relative; it is a unit of meaning as perceived by the viewer not a unit located by researcher analysis. Thus, in the reception of any one news item by a group of viewers, viewer accounts will probably vary in the 'lexias' they indicate. This is the result of differences in the visual and verbal elements viewers register in a news item (a matter to some extent of levels of attention and of selective perception) and also differences in the meanings they attribute to what they do see and hear. So, for instance, some viewers would notice a shot of an expensive car in the pictures accompanying a particular story, turning this into a lexia about 'wealth', others would not register it at all. Shots of workers at a factory gate might be registered as significant by all viewers, but some might construct a lexia of 'ordinary workers' whilst others might construct one of 'union activists'. This could contribute to widely different interpretations of the item as a whole.

By 'theme' Lewis points to a category of meaning at a higher level than 'lexia'. Viewers generate themes from the different parts of news items by

combining 'lexia' to produce propositional meanings regarding what the item is about, what is or has happened. Lewis notes that there will often be more than one theme produced in the viewing of even a brief news item, and that it is possible for there to be not only diversity but also a degree of tension and conflict between themes (leading to a need for viewers to 'figure out' an overall significance, or remain rather confused).

Lewis holds both 'lexia' and 'theme' within an even broader category of meaning, which he calls 'narrative context'. This refers to the particular history within which a particular news item is set by viewers and which provides an important, outer framing for interpreting it. For many items, the broader 'story' within which they are located may be available to viewers primarily if not solely through previous news coverage, while for others viewers will have a range of sources of knowledge to bring to bear. One might expect that foreign news stories, like Middle-East peace negotiations, generally present more problems for viewers and involve more media-dependency in the narrative contexts which surround them than domestic stories, like industrial disputes. However, the kinds of narrative context into which even domestic stories are set vary considerably between viewers, producing in some cases a degree of 'misunderstanding' to which Lewis' attention is drawn, as I shall illustrate below. (It is interesting to note that, although he is keen not to presume too much about what items mean in advance of what respondents say about them, Lewis subsequently feels able to categorize certain interpretations as 'wrong'. In his judgement, these do not produce an accurate understanding of what a report said and showed).

c) Methods

There is a relatively straightforward approach here. Lewis takes 50 viewers and conducts individual interviews with them following video screenings of the *News at Ten* edition. He starts in an open-ended way, but then moves to more specific questions relating to the items, accompanied by relevant follow-ups. By not using groups (in this study, he has no interest in the social patterning of 'opinion') he is able to generate more continuity of account from his respondents and, perhaps, achieve a more sustained engagement with programme form and content, though I have noted above that the 'individuals or groups?' issue has a number of aspects to it. His use of the interview transcripts is mainly to illustrate the range of 'lexias', 'themes' and 'narrative contexts' which his viewers generated from what they saw and heard and to connect these with formal features of the journalistic exposition.

Assessment of Findings and their Implications

I have suggested that, by closing down his focus, Lewis is able to produce a study strong in convergent documentation around his chosen news broadcast. Indeed, his account of how meaning is produced through 'decoding' runs some risks of oversimplification by being so narrowly aligned to specific news items viewed just before respondent questioning. Furthermore, his categories of meaning production provoke questions about definition and interrelationship (for instance, how do you identify separate 'lexia'?; how interactive is the connection between 'lexia' and 'theme' in meaning-building?). However, the clarity and coherence which he is able to get into his account and the

variations he is able to show, and partly to explain, more than make up for the limitations, though these need to be recognized as such.

One of his examples concerns an item about a British Conservative minister making a speech to Conservative party members at a regional rally. The minister received vigorous applause from the audience, both on being introduced and after his speech. In the item, the newscaster and then the location reporter suggest that the main explanation for this applause lies in the fact that, inside his Party, the Minister had been through a lengthy period of criticism for his policies but had now apparently regained the support of ordinary Party members. This explanation refers to a 'narrative context' of quite long-term shifts in internal party debate, it has very little specifically to do with what the Minister said at the rally. However, many of Lewis' respondents failed to connect with this broader context and interpreted the applause 'narrowly', as indicating simply a high level of satisfaction with the speech itself. The 'lexias' and 'themes' they constructed did not pick up on the wider political meanings. Why? Partly, Lewis suggests, because this wider explanation is given by voice-over in the introduction to the story, at a time when viewers are 're-focusing' from the previous item. If they are not already alert to political meanings at this level, then it is unlikely that such a way of communicating them will affect their interpretations. Moreover, the account given of the rally works as a self-contained narrative, accompanied and supported by pictures. Within the causal terms of the visible story, an 'obvious' reason for the applause is what was said in the speech from which extracts have been seen and heard. Of Lewis' 50 respondents 41 made reference to the content of the speech in discussing the item, despite the fact that, from the journalists' point of view, what was said is virtually of no significance compared to the function of the occasion as a test of grass-roots' attitudes towards the Minister.

Lewis cites many other examples where different routes are taken in interpretation, leading sometimes to very different destinations. In a move which is completely original within this tradition of research, Lewis then turns his attention back to the television broadcast itself and asks how it *might* have been organized so as to minimize such variation. He offers a version of the Minister's speech story which is far more grounded in narrative values. In this version, an element of suspense is built up (how will the Minister be received?), footage of the speech itself is omitted and the story reaches a climax with the applause being shown at the same time as the broader explanation for it is offered in voice-over.

There are a number of objections one could make to this type of practice – might it not be too condescending to narrativize the item so strongly, with a 'teaser' element? Might it not be an unacceptably 'heavy' way to offer journalistic interpretation – running it directly across images of the unfolding event rather than cueing it in the introduction?

Whatever the judgement here, Lewis provides a lucid and convincing study of some of the factors involved in the constructive process of news comprehension. He traces many of these back to conventions of news exposition and offers suggestions as to how the conventions might be revised! Written over ten years ago, this is a study which still fully repays close reading and discussion.

2) Jen Ang – Watching Dallas

Ang's study (1985), carried out in Holland, poses and explores the question of interpretation in a very different way from Lewis's. Although the production of meaning and knowledge is still central, the issues raised by the research converge around matters of imagination and pleasure, and then around the relation of these to political factors. *Dallas* was a US-made TV soap series about a rich Texas family. It became a huge international success in the late 1970s and early 1980s, drawing widespread attention to itself as an unprecedented type of popular cultural phenomenon. Ang's data concerns *Dallas* in general, not any one particular episode, and her access to viewer interpretation is not through transcribed speech but through the 42 letters she received in response to an advertisement placed in a magazine.

a) Theory

The theoretical context which Ang identifies for the study is provided by the conflict between two positions on the relationship between ideology and popular culture. One position puts emphasis on the conservative character of popular culture and regards the imaginative relationships which it typically initiates with its audiences – through the stereotyped characterizations, melodramatic plots and sentimental values of its fictions – as placing constraints on critical self-awareness and therefore on the pursuit of equity and democracy. The other is more keen to note the disjunction between fantasy pleasures and real attitudes and behaviour, the extensive range of themes and impulses which popular entertainment displays and the active, selective and transformative way in which audiences 'work' it into their own lives, often using it to provide emotional release.

How does the viewing experience of the letter-writing respondents, including some who dislike *Dallas* as well as many who are fans of it, bear on this divide?

In searching for an answer, Ang adds a range of supplementary questions both about how the series works as communication and about the political and cultural implications of its popularity. One of the most important of these questions concerns how 'realism' figures in the perception and enjoyment of *Dallas*, for the question of how viewers see the series to be related to the real is obviously important in determining the character, 'conservative' or 'progressive', of its imaginative dynamics.

b) Concepts

In her study, Ang attempts to document and investigate aspects of the 'melodramatic imagination'. This requires paying close attention to the way in which the letter-writers express their 'bond' with the programme (or their inability to form one). It is interesting to note that interpretative variation, though it figures quite strongly in her data (different reasons for watching, different 'favourite' characters, etc.) does not have the same significance it had in Lewis' study. There, it was connected to a theory about social comprehension, which finally was returned back to questions of 'faulty' exposition. Lewis is interested in picking up on specific referential and propositional meanings. In Ang's study, the question of meaning is addressed

most often at the level of the imaginative significance given to dramatic action. This certainly connects with matters of primary understanding but puts the emphasis on the way understanding is turned into pleasure. Here, considerable individual variation is only to be expected (one person likes character X, another loathes him, etc.). Ang is finally more interested in convergence than in variation, and in particular she is interested in the relations between pleasurable viewing and 'realism'. She discusses the different ways in which a dramatic fiction might be said to be 'realistic' and suggests that, for many viewers, it is at a very generalized level of engagement with the emotional pattern carried by its narratives ('emotional realism') that the success of *Dallas* can be seen to operate.

c) Methods

The use of letter material rather than the questionnaire return or transcribed speech is an important difference. Its strength is that it provides respondents with an opportunity to 'think through' their views. One of its weaknesses is that, unlike the one-to-one interview (see Lewis above) it allows for no clarificatory or supplementary questions and, unlike focus groups, it allows no opportunity for views to be exchanged and perhaps contested. Moreover, sociologically it carries with it the considerable risks of self-selection and perhaps quite radical unrepresentativeness. The more the data is pressed beyond an exploratory use in the generation of hypotheses, the more these risks become limitations. Nevertheless, Ang is able to provide extensive documentation for the themes she wants to explore. This is helped by the way in which her concern with questions of general imaginative engagement does not require her to offer the same degree of analytic attention to the detail of interpretative process that other studies have found necessary in order to support their theories.

Assessment of Findings and their Implications

Ang's study documents a number of factors that come into play when viewers watch popular series drama on television. The appeal of the melodramatic form and the essentially 'tragic' set of sentiments informing it are well explored. She is able to engage with the much-debated issue of 'realism' by reference to the ways in which viewer-respondents perceive life in *Dallas* to relate to 'real life'. She is also able to open up questions about the way in which gender is a factor in viewing, since, without being too categorical, it is possible to see series like *Dallas* as offering distinctive imaginative satisfactions and points of identity for women. In many respondents, she notes an element of guilt, as if the pleasures they clearly get from watching the series are in contradiction with evaluations about its cultural worth which, to some extent, they hold themselves. In others, she notices an apparently dismissive attitude towards 'high taste' and an uncomplicated celebration of the series. However, in both cases she often finds respondents to be articulating points of tension which they have not fully resolved. The two different perspectives on ideology and popular culture which I noted above are reworked here as ways of explaining this tension.

In fact, Ang suggests two different and conflicting ideologies. There is a 'mass culture' ideology which regards popular entertainment as aesthetically

trashy and/or socially harmful (this is the kind of view, she notes, which is often put forward by intellectuals) and a 'populist' ideology which works with a commonsensical assertion of the validity of 'what you like' (not surprisingly, this view is often supported by the television industry itself). There is finally an ambivalence about where *Dallas* can be placed in relation to the interplay between these ideologies. Part of this ambivalence stems from the wish to preserve the difference between 'fantasy' and 'real life' values and to be sensitive to the positive, recreative and restorative functions of the 'melodramatic'. Part of it stems from the desire to retain a theory about the way in which subjectivity and self-awareness (in this case, particularly the subjectivity and self-awareness of women) can be 'regulated' by elements of imaginative life drawn from fiction. Fictions can be both oppressive and liberating and they can be both at the same time. Although such a conclusion might be too equivocal to provide a strong finish to such an original study, it is an equivocation which much research in cultural studies and feminist studies has found it hard to resolve. Moreover, like much good research, Ang's project provides data and ideas which have a value well beyond her own attempt at drawing them all together.

The Future(s) for Media Reception Study

Work on 'reception' has become a necessary part of contemporary media research, routing it back to elements of the 'classic' sociological tradition after a period in which structuralist marxism and semiotics often appeared to be conducting a study of 'ideology' so precise that the need for investigation of what audiences thought and felt was frequently not recognized and sometimes denied. Though it is contentious in its implications, the view that we are now in a phase of postmarxist, poststructuralist media research, in which the very use of the term 'ideology' calls attention to itself as requiring operational definition, is hardly disputable. However, in its reconnection with the audience, reception analysis brings with it a more complex sense of what is involved in media meaning-making, in the types of imaginative engagement which audiences have with media output and in the formation and nature of 'subjectivity' and 'identity'. This is a big gain. Certainly, no study of media influence, be it of advertising, of political broadcasting, of drama-documentary, or of soap opera or whatever, can afford to ignore the kinds of close documentation of the interpretative process and of response which reception studies can provide.

The 'turn' to reception has recently run the risk of subdividing itself off from other aspects of media research and developing its own agenda. While this is an all too common practice in academia, such a movement will not help improve the quality of media investigation. Reception studies and ideas about reception need to be connected both to a close interest in media form and content and to the broader questions of political, social and economic organization. If this interferes with their 'tidiness' as an academic activity, so much the better. One result of a 'semi-detached' reception analysis is a certain lack of consequentiality in the findings themselves and an uncertainty of tone.

perhaps even a diffidence, in the research conclusions. I noted earlier how this has begun to be noticeable in some recent studies.

My discussion has highlighted a number of problems which reception studies have run into and often have still to solve. Not the least of these is the need for much greater precision and clarity in the conceptual vocabulary. There is also the requirement to move definitively beyond the stage of pilot-study impressionism and to produce work which has good levels of verifiability and replicability in its findings. As I have indicated more than once, generalizability is also a problem - so many studies have simply ignored the possible differences between their own sample groups and the general population categories about whom their conclusions are formulated. This might mean attempting to get a stronger element of quantitative analysis (with the use of statistical sampling and of response coding) into reception research. There is still enormous opportunity for experiment and innovation here. I have suggested that with the decline both of the ideological paradigm and the inverse simplicities of 'resistance', a more measured analysis of mediation processes is likely to develop, connecting with interpretative variety but seeking to relate this to production, textual or other kinds of contextualizing data.

At the moment, there is a strong tendency towards going 'wider' in analysis, embracing a broader range of variables and attempting to engage with these as far as possible as they occur in the settings of 'everyday life' (a key phrase in current study which, once a useful counter against formalism, is now dangerously close to being a cliché). Although its honourable model is field anthropology, given the difficulties of getting access to data there is more than a touch of 'mission impossible' about some expressions of this ambition. This is especially so when it is accompanied by a wish somehow to get greater ethnographic 'depth' into the study at the same time. The sheer scale of effort needed to *document* so comprehensively is then followed by the formidable requirement to assess the significance of diverse materials within a coherent framework of analysis.

An opposite tendency, to which I have been attracted myself, is to engage quite tightly with the interface of signification and comprehension (see also Hojer, 1992). This is, to some extent, to follow the route out of Morley taken by Lewis in the work I discussed above. It runs the risk of not attending to a large number of things which undoubtedly influence interpretation, but it has the benefit of having a good chance of saying something clear and interesting about what it does look at. Some critics might see it as a concern for the 'micro' at the cost of the 'macro', but this is not necessarily true since even highly focused research can move between these two notional levels (for instance, in looking at how viewers interpret two conflicting news headlines a researcher can tap into much more general factors of interpretative disposition and even of material circumstance). Moreover, there is still so much that we do not know about how mediated knowledge and mediated pleasures are produced.

I want to finish this discussion by looking briefly at a few of the research problems around 'reception' which I am currently confronting myself. Some of these problems are familiar ones, identified earlier in the article. Others are relatively new and result from the nature of the research topic and the wish to

go at least a little way beyond previous work. My colleagues and I are looking at how television news reports 'the economy' and how this reporting figures in the construction of popular understanding of what the economy is, how it is performing and how it *might* perform.

Clearly, such an inquiry connects directly with the much broader issue of how news services relate to public knowledge and opinion. This issue is absolutely central to the functioning of mediated democracy and it is being posed and answered in different ways all over the world. We can see the news as a 'resource', which is variously used by viewers in the construction of their 'own' attitudes, but it would be very odd indeed to ignore the extent to which it also acts as an 'influence', providing data and evaluations which can shape the direction of public understanding and perhaps also the movement of popular feeling.

In the case of economic news, we have a specific problem of comprehension, since economics is an abstract and often technical area and questions of understanding take on a different character from that which they might have if the research were to be on, say, news about the royal family, let alone on series drama or talk shows. Moreover, we think the comprehension of economic matters is distinctly 'relational' in so far as it routinely involves ability to understand shifts in a number of features of the economy, in a context where it is the *relation* between these shifts (e.g. interest rates and inflation) which is often of most significance. However, to split off comprehension from the social contingencies of evaluation and response, seeing it as a separate technical-cognitive matter, would be reductive. It would desocialize the processes at work. We need to be sensitive to the difference between, say, a person *not understanding* the relationship between inflation and unemployment claimed in a news report and, say, a person *disagreeing* with the claim. This takes us back to the arguments in Lewis, and his valuable insistence on primary understanding. However, we need to be sensitive, too, to the way in which evaluative dispositions affect selective attention and interact with the matter of what is 'understood', what is 'misunderstood' (again, the need for caution here is obvious) and what is not understood at all. If we could get some sense of how these processes relate to particular form and themes of economic news reporting, then the resulting knowledge would have value. It would have value because contesting claims about the public function and effect of news have an importance internationally and, although there has been good work done, there is still a lack of clear data and analysis on the topic.

In trying to open up questions in this area, what sort of use might we best make of viewers? There is some likelihood that comprehension and evaluation of the economy will have a pattern of variation by social class and occupation as well as by other factors, such as political affiliation and perhaps age. Yet, if we select individuals or convene groups defined by these categories, we have to be wary of falling victim to a circularity of inquiry. Circularity would occur if our analysis prioritized *common* features of response in the groups or between similarly categorized individuals (thereby marginalizing differences) and then regarded these features to be primarily the product of the social factors indicated in the categories. We need to test any such potential correlations by reference to differently constituted groups,

including 'mixed' groups. This might suggest phased research, in which we develop our ideas about viewer comprehension across separate stages of fieldwork, reviewing and identifying for appropriate 'test' the emerging lines of analysis at each stage.

We shall need to show certain news tapes to groups to get the tightness of alignment between specific reports and understandings that we require; but we also need to document something of the more general attitudes and ideas which people have about the economy and economic news, not simply in their responses to specific items of programming we choose to show. If we do not do this, there may be a danger of local linkages between chosen items and the responses they received displacing our attention to the broader relations involved. Our problem is that we want to be specific and focused but not to lose sight of these framing factors. Could a broader view, a view which is connected with the *affective* aspects of the economy, what people *feel* about it as well as with what they *know* about it, be obtained by the use of viewing diaries, perhaps not written but spoken onto cassette, kept at home by respondents? What problems are introduced by admitting this kind of data?

Knowledge about the range of sources of information which people draw on when interpreting television accounts is also necessary. We can sometimes find this indicated in respondent speech, but a more direct approach – perhaps questionnaire-based – might be the best way of pressing forward here.

One final question. We have carried out our news content analysis with *quantitative* attention to a number of factors, including the co-occurrence of certain terms and the frequency and positioning of certain words of description and evaluation. How can this approach be usefully applied to the transcripts of respondent speech? As I have indicated earlier, it can certainly be used as a check against the selective impressionism which has sometimes been a factor in reception study, particularly small-scale projects. However, can the range of search and selection packages now available for computer use allow us not just to be more confident in our analysis but also to explore aspects of perception and interpretation not accessible through non-electronic sorting? (Lunt and Livingstone, 1995, usefully consider the relationship between focus group method and emerging techniques, including computer-assisted ones, in social science analysis. See also Hoijer, 1990, on the general problem of the validity of data in reception research).

I put the above largely as a series of questions so as to bring out the exploratory and indeed challenging character of reception studies as it moves into the late 1990s, working its way beyond some of the earlier ideas and trying to generate new ones at the same time as keeping itself informed by related work going on elsewhere in the social sciences. Such an emphasis on problems might sound desperate, an indicator of the impossibility of progress; but any real development in our knowledge of media processes will have to subject itself to an equivalent conceptual and methodological scepticism. In this particular case, after a lot of discussion and a pilot study, we think we have got provisional answers to many of these questions, enough at any rate to allow us to progress our inquiries with an acceptable mixture of confidence and caution.

Most researchers would, I think, agree that our economy study is quite ambitious in scope, although its main focus is on the particular processes

involved in viewing a specific kind of media output. In this latter respect, it might be described as 'narrow' within the terms I outlined above.

The 'narrow' route is not so favoured as the 'wide' one at the moment (as I noted, there is an interest in doing justice to the scale and complexity of the culture within which the media are situated), though it remains to be seen just how productively *researchable* the latter will turn out to be. The signs are that, in the next few years, reception analysis will become the focus of a good deal of polemical urging; to turn its attention this way or that, to become more aware of this or that. Such urgings will to some extent reflect the growing significance attached to the processes of consumption within late modern societies but also the continuing requirement to engage with the power(s) of the media; their various capacities to 'influence' viewers. Though in need of intellectual re-energization, the reception approach has exerted a dynamic and positive effect upon the ideas and methods of international media research. I hope to have demonstrated how impossible it would now be for media theory to retreat from it or 'go round it', despite the problems, the wrong routes taken, the sometimes rather careless conceptualization. The only way forward lies straight on and through.

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15

On the Continuing Problem of Media Effects'

Sonia Livingstone

The Scope and Context of Media Effects Research

Introduction

The mass media occupy a high proportion of our leisure time: people spend, on average, 25 hours per week watching television,² and they also find time for radio, cinema, magazines and newspapers. For children, watching television takes up a similar amount of time to that spent at school or with family and friends. While school, home and friends are all acknowledged as major socializing influences on children, a huge debate surrounds the possible effects of the mass media and findings both in favour and against effects are controversial. The question of effects is typically raised with an urgency deriving from a public rather than an academic agenda and with a simplicity which is inappropriate to the complexity of the issue (we do not ask of other social influences what is the effect of parents on children or do schools have an effect which generalizes to the home or do friends have positive or negative effects?).

The possibility of media effects is often seen to challenge individual respect and autonomy, as if a pro-effects view presumes the public to be a gullible mass, cultural dopes, vulnerable to an ideological hypodermic needle, and as if television was being proposed as the sole cause of a range of social behaviours. Such a stereotyped view of research tends to pose an equally stereotyped alternative view of creative and informed viewers making rational choices about what to see. Overview articles often describe a history of progress over the past seventy years of research which alternates between these two extremes – first we believed in powerful effects, then came the argument for null effects, then the return to strong effects, etc. – a history whose contradictions become apparent when old research is re-read with new eyes. Contemporary media studies sometimes defines itself through its rejection of the language of effects research – criticizing the laboratory experiment, the logic of causal inference, and psychological

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