11 ARE YOU RECEIVING ME?

Justin Lewis

Television today represents one of the most important sources of information available to our society. Hours upon hours of words and images flood from the TV screen into most people's homes every day. It has become part of our environment, as varied or repetitive as the jobs some of us do when we are not watching it. It teaches us, tells stories, makes us laugh, makes us angry – it guides us into a whole series of different worlds and asks us to position ourselves in relation to them.

There is no shortage of research attempting to understand the nature and significance of this extraordinary cultural phenomenon. In spite of this, television has grown to an extent beyond our current ability to comprehend and analyse its power and influence. Social scientists have, since the popular use of the TV set, been preoccupied with particular questions about it. That is fair enough. What has been less fortunate is the preoccupation with certain ways of answering those questions.

The effect of television

The first identifiable set of questions about television failed to produce any decisive results. These questions came from within a body of research that has become known, for obvious reasons, as the 'effects' approach. This approach attempted to address a fundamental and very general question: what effect does television have on people? The scope for investigation opened up by such a question is clearly enormous, so it was not surprising that researches limited themselves to specific kinds of 'effect' and used a specific set of investigative tools. The most popular

fields of inquiry were the effects of (political) television on political attitudes and the question of whether violence on the screen precipitated violent behaviour. There is, of course, nothing wrong with these questions. The problems with the 'effects' approach are problems of method.

If you want to measure the effect of hitting people on the head with a hammer, it is not going to be difficult to come up with a workable methodology for doing so. We can, on the basis of a vast body of accumulated evidence, anticipate a range of immediate responses: the person hit on the head is likely to howl with pain, fall over, or drop down dead. However, supposing we want to measure long-term effects (if the unfortunate subject of the research lives that long) we can both anticipate them (whether mental or physical) and devise ways of measuring them. This is because:

(i) we can locate a clear difference between those who have recently been hit on the head and those who have not;

(ii) we can look for a range of possible reactions;

(iii) we can monitor a specific group of people to see whether these reactions occur;

(iv) this group can easily be composed of people who have not been hit on the head;

(v) intervening variables (like being hit on the head again) can be easily isolated, recorded, and assimilated into the monitoring process.

Watching television may sometimes *feel* like being hit on the head, but its effects are much more difficult to measure. The 'effects' tradition of research failed fully to appreciate the subtleties of this. If we want to find out whether, say, TV makes people more violent or changes their politics, we are confronted by complications at almost every stage.

1 Watching television embraces a multitude of sins. We may chat, eat our tea, or do the ironing while watching. A programme may be interspersed with comments from members of the family, or it may be watched in total silence. Moreover, since we know that the TV world and the real world are not the same, we don't necessarily perceive TV violence and real violence as having much to do with each other.

2 Because so many people are exposed to so much television, it is extremely difficult to isolate particular kinds of exposure. It is difficult, for example, to divide people into those who have watched a lot of violence on TV since the age of five and those who have not.

3 Even if we were able to make distinctions between people on the basis of which programmes they watch, this begs a number of questions. People who, for example, watch violent TV programmes may do so for a number of specific reasons. These primary motivations may be far more important than the programmes they watch as a result. Any differences which then emerge between the people who watch violent programmes and people who don't may, therefore, have nothing to do with viewing habits at all. Watching TV could be a product of the same influences that make people violent. So, even if we were able to isolate a group of people who watched a lot of violence on TV, and even if we were able to show that those people were more likely to behave violently, we could not prove that one caused the other.

4 The problem of isolating causes and effects raises the much bigger questions of *ideology*. Television is what Louis Althusser would call an 'ideological apparatus'. In other words, it is a set of meaning systems that will influence the way we think about the world. It is, however, just one of many: the family, the school, the press — all these are ideological apparatuses that shape the way we think. These ideological influences intermingle throughout our daily lives, reacting with us as social beings. Any attempt to analyse social and ideological agencies has to take account of other agencies that may intervene.

These problems are, of course, common to all types of audience research, not just the 'effects' approach. The 'effects' tradition was, on the whole, particularly unsuccessful at overcoming them precisely because television viewing was analysed as if it *was* a hammer hitting people on the head. The ubiquitous nature of TV viewing in a complex ideological world often made 'effects' studies either ambiguous or unsuccessful. So 'effects' research repeatedly, over the years, proved and disproved, for example, that violence on television makes people violent.

The fact that 'effects' studies failed to yield positive results had more to do with the limits of the methodology than with television's lack of power and influence. Carl Hovland, writing in 1959, pointed out that 'effects' research was frequently not capable of answering the questions it posed, because of the investigative methods used.[1] Reviewing the media research of the period, he demonstrated that the conflicting results they produced could be traced back to the way the research was done. Briefly, those surveys which were able to measure controlled exposure to media (before and after exposure) yielded more positive results than those sample

surveys that simply attempted to draw correlations between exposure and attitude where 'before and after' controls are difficult or impossible.

Typical of the latter was Blumler and McQuail's work on the 1959 British general election, which concluded that: 'Within the frame of reference set up by our experiment, political change was neither related to the degree of exposure nor to any particular programme or argument put forward by the parties'. [2] This conclusion is not all that surprising. The complex set of ideological forces that create or change a person's political outlook are unlikely to be dislodged by a single medium in three weeks. Such a conclusion is, however, profoundly misleading. It suggests that television does not influence people's political attitudes (a finding in line with preceding 'effects' studies of political attitudes). There are three specific problems here.

First, the long-term influence of television is neglected. While television *may* be capable of inspiring fairly rapid changes in attitude, its more profound influence will be more subtle and gradual. As Gillian Dyer points out when writing about the influence of advertising:

It is more than likely that an advertisement's effects are diffuse and long term, and there is some evidence that advertising plays a part in defining 'reality' in a general or anthropological sense . . . for instance, the sex-role stereotyping common to many advertisements – the 'little woman' as household functionary thrilling to her new polished table or whiter-than-white sheets, or the masterful, adventurous male – act, many social scientists argue, as agents of socialisation and lead many people, young and old, to believe in traditional and discriminatory sex roles. [3]

Secondly, for television to have a *measurable* short-term effect, other media or ideological agencies will have to be silent. If TV viewers and non-TV viewers behave the same way during an election campaign, this may demonstrate that television *is* influencing attitudes but that it is working in the same way as other agencies (like the press).

Studies that have isolated particular types of media effect have shown far more movement. Hartmann and Husband's study of racist attitudes, for example, found that the media played a significant role in building up racist attitudes, images, and stereotypes in all-white areas. [4] Quite simply the media was the only major source of information available to people on this subject.

Thirdly, the 'effect' of television will not necessarily be unitary. A series of news broadcasts could have a profound influence on people without necessarily influencing them *in the same way*. Television

programmes are complex collections of words and images. The meanings we construct from these words and images will depend on our positions in the world and the view we take of it.

This final point suggests an approach that acknowledges the viewer as an active subject, selecting and interpreting what she or he watches. It is to just such an approach I now turn.

Uses and gratifications

The failure of most studies to demonstrate television's effects unambiguously led social scientists to become disenchanted with the questions being asked, and to search for new questions within new frameworks. Thus began 'the functional approach to the media, or the "uses and gratifications" approach. It is the program that asks the question nor "what do the media do to people" but, "what do people do with the media?". [5]

This change in direction shifted power away from the television screen towards the viewer, who used television to gratify certain needs. As McQuail, Blumler, and Brown put it: 'Our model of this process is that of an open system in which the total experience gives rise to certain needs, some of which are directed to the mass media of communication for satisfaction'. [6] The 'uses and gratifications' approach was extremely influential, in both Britain and the United States, from the 1950s to the 1970s. It liberated the viewer from a supposed role as the passive recipient of television messages, providing space for a more sophisticated analysis of the viewing process.

In some ways, this was clearly a theoretical advance. The 'uses and gratifications' approach did, however, raise problems as well as solve them. There is a sense in which the baby had been thrown out with the bathwater. As I have already indicated, underlying the 'effects' approach were perfectly legitimate questions about the influence of television on the way we think and behave. The problem with the 'effects' research was its simplistic view of the whole process of TV viewing, which was placed inside an ideological vacuum. The ideological world that the viewer inhabited was too complex to be absorbed into the 'hammer on the head' approach of 'effects' research. The 'uses and gratifications' approach, in asserting the viewer's power to select and interpret, abandoned not only the 'effects' methodology, but the questions that that methodology failed to answer.

Television, in this perspective, becomes merely a source of 'gratification' for the viewer, whose power to select and interpret appears to reduce its

ideological force almost to vanishing point. Television is the most dominant source of information in our society, occupying us for an average of 20 hours per week. To understand it as a purely functional entity is like equating sex and sexuality with the moment of orgasm.

At the heart of the problems raised by 'uses and gratifications' is its introduction of a social world which it does not fully understand. The notion of ideology is introduced, only to be displaced by the idea of 'use' or motivation. This was succinctly revealed by Elihu Katz, when he wrote that: 'The uses approach assumes that people's values, their interests, their associations, their social roles, are preponderant and that people selectively "fashion" what they see and hear to those interests'.[7] This brings in the idea that the viewer is a social being, a carrier of ideologies — 'values . . . interests . . . associations . . . social roles' — on the one hand, while reducing these ideas to a set of motivations on the other.

The limitations of this approach were revealed in another election study by Blumler and McQuail. Having failed to find any positive results using the 'effects' approach in 1959, their next attempt incorporated 'uses and gratifications'. This appeared to be more successful, demonstrating that certain groups of voters responded differently to party political broadcasts. Their use of the 'uses and gratifications' perspective led them to conclude that:

the strongly motivated voters had responded in one direction and the less keen in another . . . whereas opinions of the strongly motivated voters were influenced by major party propaganda, the politically less keen electors responded favourably to the presentation of the Liberal case.[8]

Put in this way, the difference between the readings and responses of the 'less keen' and 'strongly motivated' are extremely difficult to explain. The problem here is the idea of motivation. Blumler and McQuail use the concept because it fits the 'uses and gratifications' model, but what does it actually mean?

If we substitute 'motivation' with 'ideology', these differences become explicable. The 'strongly motivated' groups were defined as such because they thought within a certain ideological viewpoint. The 'weakly motivated' viewers, on the other hand, clearly did not have the ideologies necessary to respond positively to the Conservative or Labour broadcasts. The Liberal broadcasts, however, did not require these ideologies (or required a different set of perspectives) for viewers to respond positively. It may be, for example, that the Labour and Conservative broadcasts worked within a framework of traditional parliamentary issues (like

'balance of payments'). This approach would attract those people who were familiar with those political ideas and alienate those who were not.

Where does that leave us? The limitations of 'effects' and 'uses and gratifications', once understood, provide the conditions for developing a more sophisticated approach. Such an approach must take into account the nature of television as an ideological apparatus and the fact that our view of the world is shaped by this and other apparatuses. Watching TV therefore becomes a complex interplay of ideologies.

The meaning of television

In Britain in the 1970s, approaches that had been developed in literary theory, psychoanalysis, and social theory began to be applied to media studies. These new approaches shifted the focus of media research not only away from 'effects' and 'uses and gratifications' but from audience studies generally. The emphasis moved towards the *message* of television, what it said and how it said it. On one level, the idea that television was socially or politically 'neutral' or 'impartial' was challenged — notably by the Glasgow University Media Group in their *Bad News* studies. On the other, the content of television was analysed as a socially conducted set of meanings. These meanings were broken down and scrutinized in journals like *Screen* and *Screen Education*, or related to social and ideological processes in studies like *Policing the Crisis* (Hall *et al.*).

In many ways, this shift towards the TV programme or programmes was both important and useful. Sophisticated forms of analysis from semiology, cultural studies, textual analysis, and ideology were applied and developed in relation to television. These developments have significantly increased our understanding of various forms of television and how they work.

One of the most important of these developments was the application of semiotics to television. Semiotics is the study of meaning — what meanings are attached to things, why those meanings are attached, and how they are attached. Here, at last, was a method for developing TV audience research.

The first principle of semiotics is that there is no natural relation between a thing (whether that thing is a sound, an image, or the kitchen table) and the meaning of that thing (the concepts we use to understand it). Rather, this meaning is seen as the product of our relationship with the thing, of our position in the world, and the ideologies that enable us to understand it. So, for example, when we see a number of men on our screens dressed in white scattered around a comparatively empty but

substantial green space, while simultaneously hearing a voice that does not appear to originate from anywhere on the picture, most of us would be able to say that we were watching a game of cricket. This understanding comes from a whole series of ideologies — or, to be more specific, from various *cultural codes*.

Some of these codes will have been learnt at home and at school — codes that allow us to understand what a 'game' or 'sport' is, for example. To a visitor from another planet who had no notion of games or sport, watching a cricket match or a baseball game would be like witnessing a weird and incomprehensible ritual. To most of the non-cricket-playing world on this planet, watching a cricket match would be comprehensible in terms of a *general* cultural code, but only a very specific cultural code — the rules of cricket — would enable them to understand fully what was going on.

Watching a cricket match on TV would only become fully clear, however, if the viewer had the complex cultural codes for understanding television. The mysterious voice from somewhere out of the picture we are able, as well-trained TV watchers, to understand as the voice of a 'commentator'. The fact that the men in white appear and disappear quite suddenly, simultaneously growing or shrinking, does not contravene the laws of science. To the trained viewer, such abnormalities appear quite natural — we *know* that TV broadcasts can switch from one camera to another, from one lens to another, and we are *used* to seeing it that way.

Watching TV, in short, requires learning and skill. We need to learn both the codes or rules of the world it communicates and the codes/rules of the way it communicates.

In semiotics, this process of constructing meaning is called *signification*. This is the process where the 'thing' or signifier (the picture of a cricket match, for example) we see, hear, or experience is interpreted. This interpretation is not natural but learnt — it involves attaching a concept — or signified — (like 'cricket is a sport') to that 'thing'. The interpreted — or signified — 'thing' is called a *sign*. In short: the signifier (thing) + the signified (concept) = the sign.

Once we have come to terms with this new terminology, the process it describes seems perfectly obvious. What, then, have we gained simply by describing it with a new set of words?

The answer lies in the assertion that, to stress it once more, the relation between signifier and signified is not *natural* but *learnt*. Objects, images, sounds, smells do not naturally mean anything. A picture of Prince Charles could signify any number of things: wealth, royalty, the ruling class, a white man, husband of Princess Diana, English imperialism,

and so on and so on. A second picture of Prince Charles talking to a Rastafarian in Brixton may, depending on the first association and a whole range of new ones, signify class difference, racial conflict, racial harmony, cultural imperialism, or simply 'what a nice man of the people Prince Charles is'.

It is the *ambiguity* of the process of signification that makes it so important to define it and understand it as precisely as possible. It is in this sense that we can talk about 'cultural codes'. The way we construct meanings will depend on the cultural codes we have learnt. This, in turn, will depend on our material circumstances — the kind of society we live in, our position in it, family, school — the whole range of our experience. To make sense of television's multifarious and complex words and images is, effectively, to *decode* them. To study the influence or role of television on people is, therefore, to study a *process of decoding*.

This clearly takes us a long way from 'effects' and 'uses and gratifications'. In the 1970s, however, it was purely a theoretical advance. While knowledge of the *process* of decoding became more sophisticated, attempts to use this knowledge for decoding audience research were few and far between. The sheer complexity of the task created a gaping hole in our knowledge, described by John Hartley thus:

The growing areas of semiotics and communication studies developed largely out of textual analysis of various kinds . . . and as a result, there is currently a gap in research into social discourses like the news. Most of what happens when the text is 'realised' as a 'live' discourse, when it is read by the consumer is a mystery. As Patrick Moore says about other mysteries of the cosmos, 'we just don't know'.[9]

The television experience

The trouble is, of course, that research into the meanings generated by TV viewing is extraordinarily difficult to carry out. We cannot sit inside people heads as they settle down to *Dallas* or *The News at Ten*. This, combined with dwindling budgets for research and the technological distractions of video, cable, and satellite, has limited the development of TV audience research.

Despite this, the 1980s have seen some practical developments within a new, more sophisticated framework. These developments have attempted to avoid assumptions about what particular programmes might mean or the way we respond to them, using in-depth, relatively unstructured interviews with people as a way of reconstructing the experience of watching TV.

It is unusual to be able to pinpoint clearly the beginning of a research 'tradition' (a word it is still perhaps a little too early to use). In this instance, however, David Morley's book *The Nationwide Audience*, published in 1980, represents just such a landmark. Set within the context of semiotics and cultural studies, Morley's study involves a wide range of in-depth interviews with groups following the watching of a video recording of a (then) recent current affairs programme, *Nationwide*. Morley prompted the various groups to construct their own 'decodings' of the programme, before analysing why a group of, say, working-class young women should have come up with one set of meanings and a group of trainee lab technicians with another. The original intention was to see how people's social class determined the meanings they gave to the programme. What the research in fact revealed was a much more specific set of influences, based on the 'discourses' available to people, be they a mainstream working class populism, trade union and labour party politics, or the influence of black youth cultures (Morley 1980: 137).

My own research on decoding *The News at Ten* attempted to develop this discovery (Lewis 1985). A detailed analysis of viewers' reconstructions and interpretations of a particular *News at Ten* revealed a number of things:

1 We can assume very little about the meaning of a news item – a story that was intended to be about a politician's relations with his own party was, for example, decoded as a variety of quite different stories. News broadcasters, in fact, know remarkably little about what they are communicating to the outside world.

2 The ambiguity of the news is based on its narrative structure (or rather, lack of it). News 'stories' on TV are, most of the time, not stories at all. They are fragmented collections of information and images. Programmes with tight narrative structures – like *EastEnders* or, in a different way, *Blind Date*, will be far more successful at communicating an agreed set of meanings.

3 The images and words we select when we decode TV programmes will be based upon the meaning systems available in our heads. This, in

turn, forces us to construct different stories. For example, the regular *News at Ten* item detailing where jobs have been lost and found, to one viewer, was all about the shift from manufacturing industry in the north to service industries in the south, while another decoded it as an indicator that, although unemployment was still a problem, things were getting a little better. This happened because the two had quite different sets of experiences attached to the idea of unemployment, which allowed one to select the geographical information in the item, while the other focused on the numerical information. This interplay between the viewer and the television we can call *the process of decoding*.

This decoding process takes place within a whole social process. The meaning systems available to people are dependent upon social positions – whether in the family, at work or any other sets of social experiences. The meanings attached to 'Dirty Den' from *EastEnders* will depend upon our age, gender, experience of sexuality, experience of social class, experience of areas like the East End, experience of soap operas, experience of publicans, and so on. 'Dirty Den' will accordingly become hero, villain, sex symbol, small business entrepreneur, local boy made good, Jack the lad, or male chauvinist pig. This process has been described by David Morley as 'the person actively producing meanings from the restricted range of cultural sources which his or her position has allowed them access to' (Morley 1986).

The conditions wherein this takes place have been the subject of Morley's most recent TV audiences research. In *Family Television*, Morley has shifted his attention from what specific programmes mean, to people, to what he calls 'the *how* of television watching'. In short, people do not watch TV in research conditions. They watch it with their family, with friends, while having a conversation or eating breakfast. Moreover, television does not necessarily kill conversation, it can facilitate it. Peter Collett, a researcher who filmed people in their homes watching TV, puts it like this: 'Television is *what* people talk about, while it is on, as well as at work the next day. It buttresses social relationships in the sense that it gives people something to discuss. Often it provides a focus for people to talk about other things'.[10]

This leaves us with a television experience made up of four distinct but interactive components:

(i) the TV *programme*, with its set of narrative structures and its interplay of words and images;

(ii) the *viewer*, with her or his set of cultural codes/meaning systems;

(iii) *the viewing context* — how we watch TV, who with, what we do when we're watching it and what we do with those meanings afterwards;

(iv) *our social experience* through which we evolve meaning systems — part of this social experience being, of course, the experience of watching TV.

Research in the last decade has enabled us to understand this process. One of the next stages is to measure the effects of the television experience.

Notes

1 Carl Hovland, 'Reconciling results derived from experimental and survey studies of attitude change', *The American Psychologist*, vol. 14 (1959).

2 Jay Blumler and Denis McQuail, 'The audience for election television', in Jeremy Tunstall (ed.), *Media Sociology*, London: Constable, 1970.

3 Gillian Dyer, *Advertising as Communication*, London: Methuen, 1982.

4 P. Hartman and C. Husband, 'The mass media and racial conflict', in Stan Cohen and Jock Young (eds), *The Manufacture of News*, London: Constable, 1983.

5 Elihu Katz, 'Mass communications research and the study of popular culture', *Studies in Public Communication*, vol. 2 (1959).

6 Denis McQuail, Jay Blumler, and Roger Brown, 'The television audience: a revised perspective', in Denis McQuail (ed.), *The Sociology of Mass Communications*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972.

7 Katz, op. cit.

8 Blumler and McQuail, op. cit.

9 John Hartley, *Understanding News*, London: Methuen, 1982.

10 Quoted in Jane Root, *Open The Box*, London: Comedia, 1986.

Further reading

Ang, Ien, *Watching Dallas*, London: Methuen, 1985.

Lewis, Justin, 'Decoding TV news', in Philip Drummond and Richard Paterson (eds), *Television in Transition*, London: British Film Institute, 1985.

Morley, David, *The 'Nationwide' Audience*, London: British Film Institute, 1980.

Morley, David, *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure*, London: 1986.