

# 8 EMPIRICAL METHODS

We have now outlined the basic theory of semiotics and structuralism, and illustrated their applications. Semiotics is essentially a theoretical approach to communication in that its aim is to establish widely applicable principles. It is concerned with how communication works, with the systems of language and culture, and particularly with the structural relationship of semiotic system, culture, and reality.

It is thus vulnerable to the criticism that it is too theoretical, too speculative, and that semioticians make no attempt to prove or disprove their theories in an objective, scientific way. It can also be criticized on the grounds that the evidence used to support or illustrate the theories is highly selective. I chose the examples in chapter 6, critics would say, because they gave untypically clear illustrations of the theories I was expounding. And further, how can I know that the readings I have discussed do, in fact, take place? Can I be sure that I have offered anything other than my personal subjective and thus possibly idiosyncratic decoding?

## **Empiricism**

These critics would argue that semiotics does not have an empirically validated base of evidence upon which to rest its theory. The aims of empiricism are: to collect and categorize objective facts or data about the world; to form hypotheses to explain them; to eliminate, as far as possible, any human element or bias from this process; and to devise experimental methods to test and prove (or disprove) the reliability of the data and the hypotheses.

Empiricism differs fundamentally from semiotics in that:

- (a) it is deductive instead of inductive;
- (b) it assumes a universal, objective reality available for study;
- (c) it assumes that humans are able to devise methods of studying this reality objectively;
- (d) it assumes that hypotheses explaining this reality are capable of proof or disproof.

It does, in other words, fit neatly with the common-sense, science-based picture of the world that our western technological materialist society is based on. This is not the place to go into the relative merits of deductive empirical and inductive theoretical ways of understanding reality. What I wish to do in this chapter is to show some empirical ways of approaching areas similar to those covered semiotically in the last few chapters. The first of these is content analysis.

### Content analysis

Content analysis is designed to produce an objective, measurable, verifiable account of the manifest content of messages. It analyses the denotative order of signification. It works best on a large scale: the more it has to deal with, the more accurate it is. It works through identifying and counting chosen units in a communication system. Thus if I watch all television drama over a period and count the numbers of men and women portrayed, I will find that men outnumber women by at least 2:1. This is a content analysis. The units counted can be anything that the researcher wishes to investigate: the only criteria are that they should be readily identifiable and that they should occur frequently enough for statistical methods of analysis to be valid.

#### *Kennedy and Nixon*

Words are often counted. Paisley (1967) counted the number of times Kennedy and Nixon used particular words in their four television debates during the 1960 election. Their use of the words 'treaty', 'attack', and 'war' showed interesting differences. The data in table 2 provides some evidence for the conclusion that Nixon's attitude was more bellicose, Kennedy's more conciliatory.

Content analysis must be non-selective: it must cover the whole message, or message system, or a properly constituted sample. It is in explicit contrast to more literary forms of textual analysis which select

Table 2 *Kennedy and Nixon: word frequency*  
Frequency of use per 2500 words

Word	Kennedy	Nixon
Treaty	14	4
Attack	6	12
War	12	18

particular areas of the message for special study while ignoring others. It claims a scientific objectivity.

#### *Women on television*

This can be a useful check to the more subjective, selective way in which we normally receive messages. For instance, we may *feel* that women get a raw deal on television. Content analysis will enable us to provide some objective check on this.

Seggar and Wheeler (1973) studied job stereotyping in American fictional television and found that women were shown in a far more restricted range of occupations than were men (see table 3).

Dominick and Rauch (1972) found the same occupational stereotyping in a study of advertisements. The jobs portrayed may have differed; the similarity was that women still had a far more restricted range of occupations than men (see table 4). They also noted that women in advertisements were essentially home-bound creatures: they were portrayed indoors twice as often as outside, and five times as often as in a business setting. Only 19 per cent of their portrayals were outdoors, whereas 44 per cent of male portrayals were.

Gerbner and Gross (1976) found that women were far more likely than men to have a family, romantic, or sexual matter as their primary role in television drama. They found, for instance, that:

- one in three male leads are or intend to get married;
- two in three female leads are or intend to get married;
- one in five males are in the sexually eligible age-group;
- one in two females are in the sexually eligible age-group.

Content analysis can also be used, perhaps paradoxically, to study the form as well as the content. For instance, Welch *et al.* (1979) compared the style of television commercials for toys for boys with that of commercials for girls' toys. They found that advertisements for boys were more 'active' in that there were more cuts, and therefore more shots per

Table 3 *Five most frequently portrayed occupations on American television according to race and sex*

Males		Females	
Occupation	%	Occupation	%
Blacks			
(N = 95)		(N = 20)	
Govt diplomat	18.9	Nurse	30.0
Musician	13.7	Stage/Dancer	15.0
Policeman	9.5	Musiciar	5.0
Guard	9.5	Govt diplomat	5.0
Serviceman	5.3	Lawyer	5.0
Total	56.9	Secretary	5.0
		Total	65.0
British			
(N = 104)		(N = 17)	
Guard	13.5	Nurse	41.2
Musician	11.5	Secretary	11.8
Waiter	7.7	Maid	5.9
Physician	4.8	Govt diplomat	5.9
Serviceman	4.8	Actress	5.9
Total	42.3	Total	70.7
White Americans			
(N = 1,112)		(N = 260)	
Physician	7.6	Secretary	15.4
Policeman	7.6	Nurse	15.0
Musician	4.8	Stage/Dancer	8.1
Serviceman	4.6	Maid	6.5
Govt diplomat	4.5	Model	5.0
Total	29.1	Total	50.0

*Note*

N = actual numbers in sample

thirty seconds, and that each shot was more likely to show active movement. They concluded that even the style of commercials was helping to socialize boys into taking a more active attitude and girls into a more passive, static one.

What these examples show is that much of the interest of content analysis derives from the choice of unit to be counted, and that this count should involve a comparison.

If I have concentrated on the content analysis of gender portrayal, it is only for an example. The range of units that can be counted is almost infinite. For instance, Dallas Smythe (1953) found that television drama under-represented the very old (those over 60) and the young (those under

Table 4 *Occupations of males and females in television advertisements*

Female (N = 230)	%	Male (N = 155)	%
Housewife/mother	56	Husband/father	14
Stewardess	8	Professional athlete	12
Model	7	Celebrity	8
Celebrity/singer/dancer	5	Construction worker	7
Cook/maid/servant	3	Salesman	6
Secretary/clerical	3	Businessman	6
		Pilot	6
		Criminal	5
		Mechanic	3
		Lawyer	3
		Radio/TV interviewer	3
Other jobs scoring less than five per cent	18	Other jobs scoring less than five per cent	27

20). He found that white-collar jobs were heavily over-represented and working-class jobs were consequently under-represented. De Fleur's work (1964) supported this finding. Sidney Head (1954) found that 68 per cent of the television drama population was male, and that only 15 per cent was of lower class. He compared crime in the world of television with crime in society and found that murder constitutes 14 per cent of crime in the television world, but only 0.65 per cent of crime in the real world. Rape is more common than murder in real life, but it never occurred at all in the world of television. Gerbner (1970) also found a difference between real-life crime and television crime: for instance, television violence is usually between strangers for gain, power, or duty, whereas real-life violence is usually between intimates out of anger, frustration, or revenge.

*Strikes and the media*

The Glasgow Media Group (1976, 1980) have analysed the television coverage of industrial news. One of their many interesting findings was the disproportionately high coverage given to strikes in the motor industry, transport, and public administration, and the correspondingly low coverage of strikes in engineering (see table 5).

Before commenting on these figures, we must investigate one simple and obvious cause. Was this pattern of reporting simply a reflection of a pattern in reality; in other words, were there actually more strikes in these industries than in others? Table 6 shows that this was not the case.

Table 5 Major areas of industrial dispute coverage on television, expressed as a percentage of total dispute coverage (January–May 1975)

Industry category	Total % reports
Motor vehicles	28.0
Transport	27.0
Public administration	22.2
Total	77.2
Engineering	5.3
n = 805	

The table gives figures for principal disputes only. The Glasgow Media Group find that figures for all stoppages, the total number of working days lost, and the total number of workers involved all revealed the same disproportionate concentration on three industries.

Table 6 Principal disputes compared to television reports

Industry	No. of stoppages recorded by Dept of Employment	No. of strikes reported by TV bulletins
Engineering	6	1
Shipbuilding	1	—
Motor vehicles	7	5
Other manufacturing	1	—
Transport and communication	2	2
Miscellaneous	1	1
Public administration	2	2
Total	20	11

Table 7 takes a different approach. This compares the Department of Employment statistics with the Press Association reports (that is, what was available for publication/broadcasting) with what was published in the press and on television.

Content analysis reveals that the media distortion is there, and that television's coverage is more disproportionate than that of the press, even though the rank orders of the two media are the same. What content analysis cannot do is to help us answer the question, why? It does not presume to tell us if this pattern reflects the intimate love-hate relationship of the British public with cars and with its local authorities, or if it reflects the media editors' belief in this relationship, or if it merely

Table 7 Press and television coverage of particular economic sectors

Sector	Dept of Employment		Dept of Employment		Press Association		Press		TV	
	Working days lost %	Workers involved %	Working days lost %	Workers involved %	Dispute items %	Dispute items %	Dispute items %	Dispute items %	Dispute items %	
	Rank	Rank	Rank	Rank	Rank	Rank	Rank	Rank	Rank	
January										
Vehicles	3	2	2	18.76	2	27	1	33.4	1	41.5
Transport	5	1	3	24.7	3	11	3	21.5	3	7.5
Public admin.	6	7	1	3.0	1	29	2	17	2	24.1
February										
Vehicles	1	1	3	23.1	3	17.3	3	16.4	2	19.3
Public admin.	3	7	2	5.7	2	37.3	2	17.6	3	13.4
Transport	5	3	1	11.5	1	4.0	1	51	1	60.5

reflects an unquestioning adherence to journalistic tradition that certain areas are 'news' and others are not.

### Football on television

Drama, news, current affairs are all composed of obviously countable units. Football on television may seem less amenable to this method, but Charles Barr (1975) produced some interesting results when comparing the style of the West German presentation of the 1974 World Cup with that of the BBC's *Match of the Day*. What he chose to count was how frequently a close shot was inserted into the basic wider shot of about one-eighth of the pitch. The average time it took to register fifty shots was:

West German television	12 minutes 45 seconds
BBC <i>Match of the Day</i>	6 minutes 57 seconds

The difference may have been caused by the fact that *Match of the Day* is an edited recording of highlights, and that highlights are naturally shot in close-up. This hypothesis assumes that quieter periods of midfield play are shown in long shot, whereas goal-mouth drama, free kicks, arguments, corners, and so on are shown in close-up. To test this, Barr did a content analysis of what was shown in close-up. He studied twenty-five close-ups from each of three West German television matches and from two editions of *Match of the Day*, to find out if close-ups were used when the ball was in or out of play. His results averaged out as in table 8.

Table 8 *Use of close-ups in television football coverage*

	Close-ups used when:		
	ball in play	ball out of play	
West German television	7	18	} per 25 } close-ups
BBC 'Match of the Day'	16.5	8.5	

Closer analysis showed that the difference was even more marked. In one West German television match, out of nine consecutive close-ups showing the ball in play, only one showed a player running with the ball in an open situation, five showed the goalkeeper with the ball, one showed a player whose shot had been saved, one a player shielding the ball as it ran out of play, and the last a player about to be fouled.

Conversely, the majority of the British television's close-ups showed players running with the ball in an open situation.

The trouble with much content analysis is that it tends to leave one asking 'so what?' Are the differences here significant, and if so in what way? Is the audience different? Perhaps the British audience is less specialist and needs its football made more dramatic by the use of editing and camera work. Barr quotes Alec Weekes, producer of *Match of the Day*, saying, 'What about the development of action replay and other specialist shots? They are for the mums and daughters really. The fan would be quite content to see a one-camera coverage.' Close-ups concentrate on the stars, on the personal skills, on dramatic conflicts between individuals. Long shots show team work, the less dramatic but skilful running off the ball, the more specialist tactical positioning. Are the high transfer fees, the press and television attention given to great players or personalities, and the television style of presenting football all signs that we see football as another branch of showbiz with a star system as its core? Does Germany see its football as a more tactical team game? Content analysis can never answer speculative, large-scale questions like this, but at least it can provide us with some data upon which to base our discussion.

### Gerbner, content, and culture

The worker who has produced the most fully developed theory of how content analysis can shed light on deeper cultural matters like this is George Gerbner. He believes that a culture communicates with itself through its total mass-media output, and that this communication maintains or modifies the broad consensus of values in a culture. For him, the great strength of content analysis is that it analyses the whole message system, and not the individual's selective experience of it. It is the 'massness', that which is available to the culture as a whole, that is significant, and it is this with which content analysis can cope. Gerbner thinks that the important characteristics of the media are the patterns that lie under the whole output, not the individual television programme. These patterns are absorbed gradually by the viewers, without their ever becoming consciously aware of them. Gerbner's analysis is aimed at revealing these patterns. Much of his work has been on the portrayal of violence on television.

*Killers: Killed* The amount of violence has been well documented. Gerbner (1970) shows that eight out of ten plays on American television contained violence; five out of ten leading characters committed it; six out

of ten suffered it. There were four hundred casualties per week. But the significant patterns start to emerge when he analyses who are the violent and who are the victims: one pattern is revealed by his killers:killed ratio. Killing is the most extreme and efficient form of violence and is critical in distinguishing heroes from villains; and identifying the types of people who kill and the types who are killed can tell us much about the social values in a particular society. It is, for instance, comparatively rare for a white, middle-class male in his prime of life (say aged 18–30) to be killed, but he is a comparatively common killer. Gerbner sees this as a direct reflection of social values: we rate highly the middle class, whiteness, and youth. His full figures are given in table 9. On figures like these Gerbner bases his conclusion that violence on television is a dramatic portrayal of power and influence in society. The social groups who are most valued are most likely to provide the heroes who are, in turn, most likely to be the successful violent. Conversely, the least-valued social groups are most likely to provide the victims. Content analysis is the only method which can reveal such large-scale patterns in television output as a whole.

Table 9 *The ratios of killers to killed on American television in terms of age, class, and race*

	Killers	:	Killed
Age			
Young adult	5	:	1
Middle-aged	2	:	1
Old	1	:	1
Class			
Upper	1	:	1
Middle	3	:	1
Lower	1	:	1
Race			
White American	4	:	1
White foreigner	3	:	2
Non-white	1	:	1

### Content analysis and cultural values

While content analysis concerns itself with the denotative order of communication, it can, and does, reveal patterns and frequencies within this order that connote values and attitudes. The early content analysts

confined their conclusions to this denotative order and thus missed many of the more interesting, though perhaps more speculative, conclusions of workers like Gerbner, Dominick and Rauch, or Seggar and Wheeler. We can deduce some general laws relating content analysis in the denotative order to connotations of social values: the over-representation of men, white-collar jobs, and certain age-groups and races leads to the conclusion that frequency of portrayal connotes a high rank in the value system. Or that a character's position in the structure of violent relationships connotes the relative centrality or deviance of his or her social group in real life. Being a victim on television is a metaphor for being of low status in real life. (Remember how there are similarities in the workings of connotation and metaphor.)

### Semantic differential

Meaning, we have argued, is a dynamic interaction between reader and message. A reader is constituted by her or his socio-cultural experience and is thus the channel through which message and culture interact. This is meaning. So content analysis, with its exclusive focus upon the whole message system, can provide data relevant to only part of this interaction that we call meaning. We need to study the reader as well.

One common method of doing this is known as the *semantic differential*. It was developed by Charles Osgood (1967) as a way of studying people's feelings, attitudes, or emotions towards certain concepts. If we assume that these feelings, attitudes, and emotions are derived largely from the individual's socio-cultural experience, then we find that Osgood is trying to measure what Barthes calls 'connotations'. The method is simple; it involves three stages:

1. Identifying the values to be investigated and expressing these as binarily opposed concepts on a five- or seven-point scale. Usually eight to fifteen values will be sufficient.
2. Asking a sample, or selected groups, to record their reactions on each scale.
3. Averaging the results.

### Meaning of camera angle

An illustration is the best way to explain it. Baggaley and Duck (1976) decided that they wanted to test if there was a difference in meaning between a television presenter addressing the camera directly and in

three-quarter profile. They made two simultaneous video recordings of a presenter, one from a camera that he was addressing, and one from a camera shooting him in three-quarter shot from the same distance. The only difference between the two video recordings was the camera angle.

Stage 1, they generated fourteen values to test (see figure 24). The correct way to generate the values is to show the video tapes to a pilot sample and to ask the audience to discuss freely their subjective responses to the tapes. This discussion can be prompted to go in certain directions, but the experimenter should be careful not to interfere or introduce bias. The discussion is recorded and then analysed to find the most commonly used adjectives or expressions of value. These form the basis of the value scales to be used. Stage 2, Baggaley and Duck showed each video tape to a different but similar audience and asked them to record their responses on the scales. Neither audience knew of the existence of the other tape or audience, nor what was the significant aspect of the tape they were watching. Stage 3, the mean ratings were worked out and presented as figure 24.

The audiences were small (only twelve), so we can only count large differences as significant. Thus shooting the presenter in three-quarter shot connotes considerably greater expertise, reliability, and sincerity and makes him appear more humane, fair, precise, tolerant, emotional, and relaxed. This is an interesting result, particularly when we consider how many television presenters, and politicians, like to address the camera

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Ruthless				+----	o			Humane
Fair			o----	+				Unfair
Imprecise				+----	o			Precise
Expert				o-----	+			Inexpert
Partial		+o						Impartial
Weak					+o			Forceful
Intolerant				+---	o			Tolerant
Cautious					+o			Rash
Unemotional				+---	o			Emotional
Intuitive				+o				Rational
Relaxed			o----	+				Unrelaxed
Direct		o---	+					Evasive
Unreliable				+---	o			Reliable
Sincere		o-----	+					Insincere

Figure 24 Mean ratings of a television presenter seen (+) addressing camera and (o) in three-quarter profile

directly. What Baggaley and Duck have done is to provide an empirical version of the commutation test (see p. 109). They have actually, not imaginatively, changed a unit in a syntagm and have actually, not imaginatively, tested the difference in meaning that it made.

Their work also enables us to make some interesting further points about codes and conventions. They show that a presenter in three-quarter shot appears more sincere, more direct, more expert, and generally presents a better set of connoted values. This may be surprising, for in real-life codes, facing the listener squarely is usually taken to indicate sincerity, directness, expertise, and so on. This points to an interesting distinction between real-life codes and television codes, and it is a distinction that needs stressing because television's apparent similarity to real life can all too easily lead us to the fallacious belief that television codes and real-life codes are the same. They are not: we do not respond to a televised event in the same way as to a live event.

In this case the television code has developed through convention and usage. People televised addressing the camera are nearly always media professionals who perform a script, that is who speak other people's words. But people televised in three-quarter shot are usually the experts being interviewed, the eyewitnesses who saw what actually happened. They are the honest experts speaking their own words. And they are speaking to an interviewer or reporter, not to the camera: we note how it jars if they do turn and address the camera directly.

This is a clear example of how television convention differs from real-life convention and how this difference has produced different codes. These codes are codes of connotation; they derive from the form of the signifier (which is altered by the change of camera angle). The denoted meaning is the same for each video tape. It should be possible, using the semantic differential, to construct the paradigm of significantly different camera angles. Possibly there are four: full face, three-quarter shot, profile, and from the rear. But if these differences are significant, they can have gained this significance only through convention and usage producing this unspoken agreement amongst the users.

### *The view in the mirror*

Another example of the way that the semantic differential can be used to check theoretical readings with empirical data is provided by an investigation carried out by one of my students, Jennifer Farish. She wanted to test the predictions made in chapter 1 (p. 16) about the different readings of plates 1a and 1b. She showed plate 1a to twenty-five

subjects, and plate 1b to a different twenty-five. She asked each subject to record his or her reaction on the semantic differential scales shown in figure 25. She also checked each subject's attitude to the police before showing the picture, and found that there was no significant difference in attitudes towards the police between those who saw plate 1a and those who saw plate 1b. The results of her survey are summarized in figure 25.

Please indicate your reactions to the police behaviour shown here. (NB '4' is always neutral. The more you mark to the left of '4', the more strongly you agree with the value on the left: the more you mark to the right of '4', the more strongly you agree with the value on the right.)

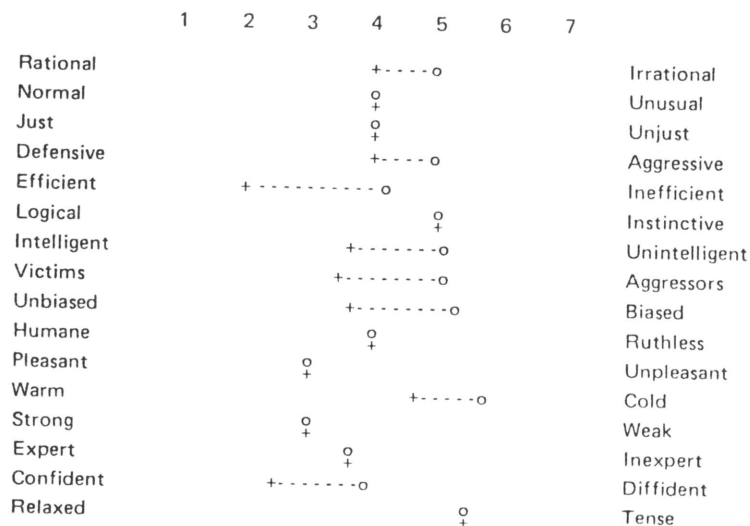


Figure 25 Averaged reactions of those who saw the full page, plate 1b (+), and of those who saw only the photograph in plate 1a (O)

As usual, the semantic differential produced some surprises, though overall the results are very much what we would predict. The average reaction to the full page (plate 1b) is more to the left (where the more favourable and common values are) than the reaction to the main photograph on its own. The full page made the police appear markedly more efficient and more confident. As we predicted, it also made them appear less biased (though this difference does not show up on the Just/Unjust scale); similarly, they appeared more rational and more intelligent and, interestingly, less cold.

What the averaging technique fails to show, however, is how the average was arrived at. For instance, the responses to the Logical/Instinc-

tive and the Relaxed/Tense scales showed a high degree of agreement, whereas the average score on the Just/Unjust and the Pleasant/Unpleasant scales concealed a wide range of differing reactions. We would need further work to account for these different patterns of response: for instance, we would need to find out *who* reacted with a 1 or a 7 on the Just/Unjust scale. It may be that factors like social class, race, sex, or political persuasion were crucial in determining people's responses.

We would also need to investigate a possible explanation for the fact that some scales produced a wide variation of response while others produced a more homogeneous one. It may be that the widely varied responses occur on scales where the audience already hold strong views: the 'readings' are as varied as the audience members, and the text has comparatively little influence upon them. Conversely, the homogeneous responses may well occur where the audience's views are less strongly held, and consequently the text is able to exert a greater influence upon the response. The negotiation between text and reader produces a meaning that in the first case is determined more by the reader and in the second by the text.

But what the investigation has provided is evidence for the view that the context of the full front page has made the original photograph fit better with the conventional picture of the police: it has made it activate the dominant *myth* more easily; it has made it more *redundant*, and thus more typical of a mass medium. It may also make us wonder whether the *Daily Mirror* reflects reality or the audience.

### Heroes, villains, and victims

Gerbner (1970) combines the semantic differential with his content analysis. Having identified the social groupings within the killers:killed relationship, he then went on to investigate how the audience saw the personalities of three categories of characters:

1. Killers, final outcome happy (these were the killers who won in the end, that is, the heroes).
2. Killers, final outcome unhappy (that is, the villains).
3. The killed (the victims).

His results are given in figure 26. These show that the only significant differences between heroes and villains were that heroes were more attractive and more efficient. This pattern of efficiency may well reflect the fact that we live in a competitive, Darwinian society, where the fittest survive and where efficiency is an inevitable correlate of success.



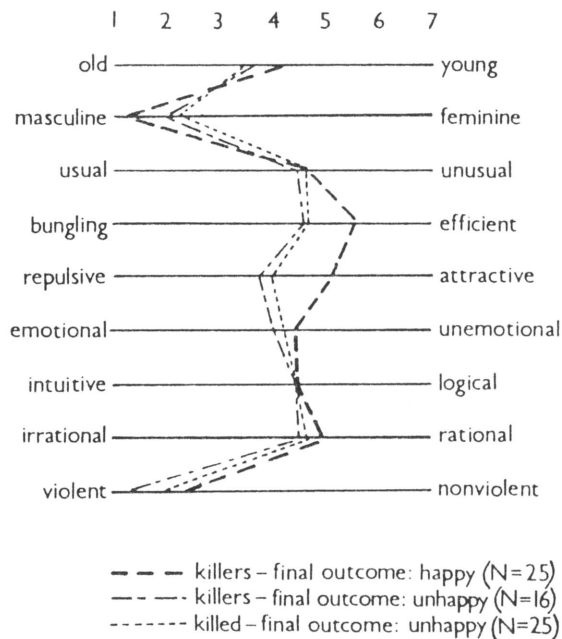


Figure 26 Personality profiles of 'killers' and 'killed'

Inefficiency is deviant in a competitive society and thus naturally correlates with villainy.

### Cultivation

Gerbner has taken the empirical study of communication further than any other worker. This is because he uses the data derived from content analysis and audience study to form the basis of the theory of how the mass-media system relates to the culture from which it grows and to which it speaks. He calls this relationship one of 'cultivation'; that is, the media cultivate attitudes and values in a culture. They do not create them – they must already be there; but they nurture, propagate, and help the culture to maintain and adapt its values, to spread them among its members, and thus to bind these members with a shared consensus, an intersubjectivity. Content analysis reveals the values embedded in the total message system of a culture; the semantic differential can investigate whether these values are actually 'cultivated' in the reader.

### Uses and gratifications theory

There are many empirical studies of the audience, particularly of the mass media. The bulk of this work has been on the effects of the portrayal of violence. Psychologists have conducted laboratory experiments, and sociologists have conducted large-scale field studies. Such work is outside the scope of this book. But I wish to introduce the reader to one other empirical method, that known as the *uses and gratifications* approach. This approach takes as its basis the belief that the audience has a complex set of needs which it seeks to satisfy in the mass media. There are, of course, other ways of satisfying needs – holidays, sport, hobbies, work, etc. It is a theory developed to explain mass communication, though it fits very well with theories of face-to-face communication which postulate that we use social relationships to satisfy personal needs and drives. This model of communication assumes an audience that is at least as active as the sender. It also implies that a message is what the audience makes of it, not what the sender intends, and thus has some similarity with the semiotic method.

### Uses of quiz programmes

The usual method of the uses and gratifications approach is a questionnaire in which members of the television audience are asked to give their main reasons for watching a particular type of programme. An example of the sort of results that this approach can yield is provided by McQuail, Blumler, and Brown (1972). In their study of the audience of television, they found, amongst other things, that there were groups of broadly similar 'uses' that people made of television quiz programmes. Table 10 summarizes their findings. Most of the audience used quiz programmes for four main gratifications: self-rating, social interaction, excitement, and education. Investigating further, McQuail and his colleagues discovered that most of those who 'used' quiz programmes for self-rating gratifications lived in council houses and were members of the working class. We might speculate that they were using the media to give themselves a personal status which their social life did not. This is a clear example of the *compensatory* use of the media to gratify needs that the rest of social life frustrates. Those who tended to use the programmes as a basis for social interaction were, not surprisingly, highly sociable types who reported a large number of acquaintances in their neighbourhoods. They used the media to provide subjects of conversation. The media here are *supplementing* other sources of need gratification. The excitement appeal

was reported most often by working-class viewers who were not very sociable. Again, a compensatory motive would seem to operate here. The educational appeal was clearly compensatory, in that those who reported this as the major gratification were ones who had left school at the minimum age.

### Uses of crime series

A student of mine, Simon Morris, made a uses and gratification study of people's use of television crime series. He found, again, a variety of uses of the programmes: viewers used them for excitement, escapism; many for information – 'they give us a picture of what life is like in big cities'; and many for reassurance – 'I like seeing law and order triumph in the end', or 'they make me feel glad I'm living safely in our little town'. A critical factor he found was not class or education, but age. The 18–30 age-group stressed the excitement/escapism gratification, whereas those aged over 50 tended to find information and reassurance in the programme.

### Categories of gratification

Though different workers label and categorize the gratifications differently, there is none the less a remarkable measure of agreement amongst them. McQuail's four main categories (outlined below) are typical, and few other workers would disagree with them fundamentally.

#### 1. *Diversion*

- (a) Escape from the constraints of routine;
- (b) Escape from the burdens of problems;
- (c) Emotional release.

All studies reveal similar escapist needs in the media audience. McQuail does at least hint that we need to go further than merely labelling these needs escapist – we need to identify what we are escaping from. Semiotic analyses of the programmes can also show us what we are escaping to.

#### 2. *Personal relationships*

- (a) Companionship;
- (b) Social utility.

'Companionship' is the media as compensation in a particularly clear form. Housewives have the radio on because they like the sound of voices in the house in the daytime. Lonely people who may find it difficult to make real social relationships turn to the media for friendship. They

Table 10 *Gratifications of television quiz programmes*

<i>Cluster 1 Self-rating appeal</i>	
I can compare myself with the experts	I completely forget my worries
I like to imagine that I am on the programme and doing well	I get involved in the competition
I feel pleased that the side I favour has actually won	Exciting
<i>Cluster 4 Educational appeal</i>	
I imagine that I was on the programme and doing well	I find I know more than I thought
I am reminded of when I was in school	I feel I have improved myself
I laugh at the contestant's mistakes	I feel respect for the people on the programme
Hard to follow	I think over some of the questions afterwards
<i>Cluster 2 Basis for social interaction</i>	
I look forward to talking about it with others	Educational
<i>Cluster 5</i>	
I like competing with other people watching with me	It is nice to see the experts taken down a peg
I like working together with the family on the answers	It is amusing to see the mistakes some of the contestants make
I hope the children will get a lot out of it	<i>Cluster 6</i>
The children get a lot out of it	I like to learn something as well as to be entertained
It brings the family together sharing the same interest	I like finding out new things
It is a topic of conversation afterwards	<i>Cluster 7</i>
Not really for people like myself	I like trying to guess the answers
<i>Cluster 3 Excitement appeal</i>	
I like the excitement of a close finish	I hope to find that I know some of the answers
I like to forget my worries for a while	<i>Cluster 8</i>
I like trying to guess the winner	I find out the gaps in what I know
Having got the answer right I feel really good	I learn something new
	A waste of time

*Subjects were given a questionnaire with these statements in random order. They were asked to indicate which statements reflected the gratifications they found in quiz programmes. Their answers tended to 'cluster' – that is, it was found that a subject who answered positively to one statement in a cluster was statistically likely to answer positively to most of the rest.*

believe in the characters of *Coronation Street* and *Crossroads* and send them birthday cards because they *need* to. Their social or personal situation does not allow them to satisfy their need for companionship in real life. The 'social utility' use is usually the provision of something to talk about. The media provide a shared experience, a shared topic of conversation that makes social interaction that much easier. If all your friends saw a programme and you did not, you feel temporarily excluded from their group.

### 3. Personal identity

- (a) Personal reference;
- (b) Reality exploration;
- (c) Value reinforcement.

By 'personal reference' McQuail refers to the way viewers use a programme as a point of direct comparison with their real life: 'I can compare the people in the programme with other people I know', or 'it reminds me of things that have happened in my life', are typical uses that he quotes. 'Reality exploration' involves a direct use of the programme content to help the viewer understand their own life. Typical quotations are: 'The people in the Dales have problems that are like my own'; 'It sometimes helps me to understand my own life'. 'Value reinforcement' is self-explanatory: 'it puts over a picture of what family life should be like' or 'it reminds me of the importance of family ties'.

4. *Surveillance* This is the need for information about the complex world we live in. Other studies have shown that people whom we can call 'opinion leaders' in their social life use the media for information in order to maintain their social role.

### Social origin of needs

Blumler and Katz (1974) stress the social origin of the needs that the media gratify. Their findings are summarized in table 11.

### Bases of uses and gratifications studies

The assumptions upon which this approach is based, then, can be outlined as follows:

1. The audience is active. It is not a passive receiver of whatever the media broadcast. It selects and uses programme content.

Table 11 *Social origin of audience needs and the media*

Social origin of audience needs	Media provide
The social situation:	
(a) Produces tension and conflict	Easement
(b) Creates awareness of problems that demand attention	Information
(c) Impoverishes opportunities to satisfy certain needs	Complementary, substitute, or supplementary servicing
(d) Gives rise to certain values	Affirmation and reinforcement
(e) Provides expectations of familiarity with certain media materials	Shared experience to sustain membership of valued social groupings

2. Audience members freely select the media and the programmes that they can best use to gratify their needs. The media producer may not be aware of the uses to which the programme may be put, and different audience members may use the same programme to gratify different needs.
3. The media are not the only source of gratification. Going on holiday, playing sport, dancing, etc. are all used as the media are used.
4. People are, or can be made, aware of their interests and motives in particular cases. (For critics of this method, this is the assumption that is weakest. Such critics argue that the motives that can be articulated are often the least important, and that to link audience and programme content only by a rational chain of needs and gratifications is limiting 'meaning' unacceptably.)
5. Value judgements about the cultural significance of the mass media must be suspended. It is irrelevant to say that *Crossroads* is trash: if it meets the needs of seven million people it is *useful*, and the fact that it offends highbrow aesthetes is neither here nor there.

### Method

A simple uses and gratifications questionnaire can be compiled in much the same way as a semantic differential. The investigator should record unstructured discussions with a sample audience in order to generate a number of stated motives for watching. These are then printed in random order on the questionnaire, and the respondents invited to record the strength of their agreement or disagreement with each motive. Morris's questionnaire looked like figure 27.

This is part of a study of reasons for enjoying detective/crime series on television. Will you please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the following statements, by placing a tick in the appropriate column. (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neutral, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree.)

Reason for watching	1	2	3	4	5
I like to identify with the hero					
I like to talk about the shows with others					
I like the tension of not knowing what is going to happen					
It makes me aware of how difficult a job the police have					
I like to imagine how I would cope with a violent situation					
Etc.					

*Note*

It is usually necessary to collect some data about the respondent: sex, age, occupation, educational level.

Figure 27 *Uses and gratifications questionnaire*

Identifying the significant patterns in the results is the hardest part of the operation. Academic researchers use a statistical technique known as cluster analysis which would be inappropriate for most readers of this book. Less pure, but more practical, is to identify the 'appeal clusters' of the statements before devising the questionnaire. It is then fairly simple to compare, say, male with female responses to statements in the 'excitement/diversion' cluster. Basic significant correlations or patterns can be revealed without sophisticated statistical method, though more advanced analysis will require correspondingly advanced analytical techniques.

### Audience ethnographies

Empirical methods tend to treat communication as a series of messages whose content is the equivalent of factual data: they have no theory of texts of signification, and thus take no account of the processes of decoding or reading. Semiotics and structuralism are concerned with the way that communication structures (and therefore generates) meaning in order to circulate it socially. They trace the interconnections between the structure of communication messages and the structure of the society in

which they work. For them, messages do not contain or convey meaning, but are agents in its production and circulation. They are therefore agents of social power.

Structuralism and semiotics can be criticized, however, for moving too easily between textual and social structures, and for ignoring the fact that, in practice, the connections between text and society can be made only through the addressee or reader. It is in the act or process of reading that text and society meet. Ethnographic study has developed in order to investigate this process and to test semiotic or structuralist readings of texts by comparing them to the readings that people actually make, or say they make.

In general, the findings suggest that semiotics and structuralism overestimate the power of the text to promote a dominant or preferred reading and underestimate the ability of readers to make sense of the text in ways that relate it directly to their social situation. So a semiotic analysis of popular romance novels, such as those published by Mills and Boon or Harlequin, could well conclude that their social function is to train women for a submissive role in marriage, to centre their happiness upon the love of a strong man, and to teach that their suffering, which the cruel side of his strength will make them undergo, will finally be rewarded because in it he will see their true worth. It is, of course, easy to relate this textual structure with the social structuring of gender roles in a patriarchal society. But Radway (1984), for instance, found that some women readers did not read the novels in this way. They preferred novels with a spirited, rebellious heroine, who kicked against her victimization by the hero. For them the plot did not trace the victimization and suffering of the heroine through which she achieved final success (marriage), but instead traced the gradual feminization of the hero: only when his cruelty had been softened, his cold aloofness warmed up, and he had become more sensitive towards her, only when he had been 'feminized' in this way would she consent to marry him. While the structure of the novels preferred masculine values over feminine ones, some readers 'negotiated' the text to produce readings that validated feminine values over masculine.

For some women, the social context of reading was at least as important as the text: their social situation was one of unrelenting service to the demands of their husband and family: by reading a novel they were able to create a time and a space of their own in which they could put themselves first (often in defiance of the explicit disapproval of their husbands). One 'meaning' of reading romance was the assertion of their own rights and self-worth – a meaning that could not be analysed in the

text, for it was produced at the moment of reading when the text met the social situation of the reader. One woman even reported that reading romances in this way gave her the self-confidence to stand up to the demands of her husband and demand more equality in their marriage.

Morley (1986) found similar significance in the way that television was watched in the family. In the urban lower-class families he studied, watching television was also part of the gender politics of the family but, unlike romance-reading, it promoted male power. The remote-control device typically lived on the arm of the husband's chair; his power was exerted in three domains – what to watch, how to watch it, and how to evaluate it.

The family viewing was organized around male tastes. Men's tastes were for factual programmes – news, sport, documentaries; or, if they watched fiction, they liked it to be 'realistic', which meant that they had to be able to recognize the outside world with which they were familiar in the programme. They also liked action drama. Women's tastes, on the other hand, were for 'family' dramas, soap operas, and romances, where the emphasis was on relationships rather than action, and whose knowledge was that of the interior world of emotions and reactions, not the exterior world of men.

Not only did men dominate what was watched; they also tried to control *how* it was watched. For the man, the house is a place of leisure where he can relax and indulge himself after work, so he likes to give himself up entirely to television and watch concentratedly. For the woman, however, the home is a place of work, and she has to fit television-watching in with her domestic labour – which includes not only washing, ironing, sewing, and other forms of housework, but also talking to the children, for the woman's role includes managing the relationships and human resources of the house as well as its material ones. So women watched television distractedly, almost always doing something else at the same time. This often annoyed the men, who frequently complained of the noise and chatter of the women and children while they were watching their programmes.

Women often used VCRs to timeshift their programmes to outside their working day, whose limits seemed to be set by the presence of other family members. They would record their programmes and watch them with full attention either early in the morning or late at night when everyone else was in bed, or sometimes they would find a 'window' in the early afternoon when the morning's work was done and the children had not yet returned from school.

These different ways of watching were, of course, determined socially,

that is by the organization of work; they are not innate characteristics of the male and female sexes. So women who worked outside the home tended to watch television in similar ways to the men who did. Gender relationships are political because they are determined by social forces, not by nature.

This masculine domination extended even to the evaluation of the programmes. So masculine tastes were labelled as serious, good television, whereas the programmes that women liked were called trivial, light, or trashy. Soap opera (which appeals largely to women) is commonly considered the lowest form of television, and, in literature, romances are equally often used to typify the lowest form of the novel. The relationship between critical evaluation and social position is not, of course, coincidental, for devaluing women's cultural tastes is another way of subordinating them socially. An important point to make here is that women typically internalize masculine values and will often disparage their own cultural tastes (and thus, implicitly, themselves) by calling them 'trashy stuff' or 'silly'. This is an example of women participating in the ideology that subordinates them, an issue that we will explore in more detail in the next chapter when we discuss theories of ideology.

The ways in which texts are used socially may not be apparent in the structure of the texts themselves and thus may not be available for textual analysis. Equally, some of the meanings of texts may not be revealed by a textual analysis because they are produced at the moment when the text meets the social situation of the reader, and in this meeting the reader may bring unanticipated, non-textual factors to the process of making meaning.

So Hodge and Tripp (1986) found that Australian school students read a television soap opera called *Prisoner* in a particular way. The show was set in a women's prison and centred on the relationships that the prisoners and wardens formed amongst and between themselves. The school students made meanings of the programme that were relevant to their experience of school. They read the prison as a kind of metaphor for the school. Both were institutions designed to turn their inmates into the sort of people society wanted them to be, rather than what they themselves wanted to be; in both there was the sense that real life went on outside. Both attempted to control every aspect of their inmates' lives, and in both there were areas where this control was resisted – the toilets and bicycle sheds in schools, the laundry in the prison. There were similar types amongst both wardens and teachers – the bully, the soft new one, the decent one, and so on. Prisoners and students used similar ways of communicating under the eyes of wardens/teachers by winks and secret

notes. The similarities were numerous.

There was nothing in the text that explicitly referred to school. These meanings were made as the text was brought into contact with the social situation of its viewers. They were not available to semiotic or structural analysis, but could be discovered only by ethnography. There is also some evidence that these socially relevant meanings became part of the school students' behaviour, for many teachers wrote to the programme producers complaining that it taught indiscipline and made their jobs harder. While semiotic and structuralist theory can allow for different readings being produced from the same text, and Hall and Eco both argue that this must happen with the mass media, ethnography can give us insight into some of the readings that are produced in specific situations, and can thus put some flesh on the bones of the theory.

I investigated the different readings of a particular moment in the television show *The NewlyWed Game* (Fiske 1989a). The four wives were off-camera when their husbands were asked 'Which would you say best sums up your wife's response recently to your "romantic needs"? "Yes, master", "No way, José", or "Get serious, man"?'. All four men said that 'Yes, master' was the appropriate response; but when the wives came back on camera, two of them answered 'Yes, master', one 'Get serious, man' and the other 'No way, José'.

Different people read this small moment of popular culture in different ways. Some women, particularly those sympathetic to feminism, found the sexism in the question so powerfully offensive that for them the exchange was an example of patriarchy at its most blatant, particularly in its assumption that women's sexual pleasure could be defined only as a response to men's 'romantic needs'. Other women, however, found great pleasure and significance in the responses of those who refused to say 'Yes, master'. They were concerned more with how women coped with and struggled against patriarchal domination than with the domination itself. In the bits of experience that failed to fit into the dominant myth of marriage they found pro-feminine meanings that resisted and opposed the myth and its work in gender politics.

Some men produced 'dominant' readings: they laughed *with* the 'masterful' men on the show and laughed *at* the two with the less compliant wives. Other men, however, felt that the exchange, far from promoting patriarchy, actually exposed and interrogated it. They felt that the question put men on the spot, and that they would feel forced to answer 'Yes, master' in public, however much that might differ from their attitude in private with their wives. They felt that the embarrassment of the men whose wives 'showed them up' was greater

than the embarrassment of the women who answered 'Yes, master'. They felt, in sum, that masculinity (as it is defined by patriarchy) came off far worse than femininity.

While all these readings 'read', in some way, the patriarchal structure of the text and the dominant myths of marriage and gender relations, they also produced meanings that differed from the dominant and in some cases contradicted it. The differences came from the different social situations of the readers, their gender, and the ways in which they lived their own gender relationships in their everyday lives. Their readings were not 'free' of the dominant, preferred one, but neither were they bound by it. Rather they were produced in co-operation with it, in reaction to it, or in counteraction against it. They provided some examples of how Hall's 'preferred reading' theory or Eco's one of 'aberrant decoding' could be seen in practice.

Ethnographic work can be both rewarding and full of problems. The rewards are its ability to see communication as a social as well as a textual practice, and to trace this social dimension not in large-scale socio-political theory but in the concrete circumstances of everyday life. Doing it involves observing people in the communication process and getting them to talk about their role in it as fully and openly as possible. But there are two types of problem involved here.

One is the role of the investigator, and the effect that his or her presence has. Traditionally, the ethnographer was taught to be objective and distant, to be a scientific observer in the empiricist mode. More recently, however, ethnographers have used their own experience as fans of the text in question to participate in the process rather than observe it. They join in discussion with the fans as equals, using their own experience as part of what they are studying, thus developing a rapport with their subjects that enables them to get a closer and more intimate insight into what the text means to them. Both Radway (1984) and Hobson (1982) have been particularly successful in this. The presence of the observer must make some difference – more sympathetic, friendly observers will inevitably get different responses from more distant, scientific ones; and this sort of ethnography cannot be an objective empirical science: it extends the interpretive analytical mode from texts to the people who read them and the meanings they make from them. It is thus an extension of semiotics and should perhaps be referred to by a name like 'ethno-semiotics'.

It has other problems which also differentiate it from empiricist work; these are the problems of interpreting the data it produces. It does not produce, as empiricism does, facts whose meanings are inherent in them,

but further evidence of a cultural process at work that requires interpreting by a theoretically informed method just as does the original text.

The methodological model for ethno-semiotics, then, is linguistic, not empiricist. The audiences studied are not, as empiricism demands, representative of an objective social category, and the meanings they produce cannot be generalized out to that category as a whole. Ethnographic data is, rather, like a sentence to a linguist. As a sentence is an example of language in process, so ethnography can provide us with instances of communication in process. These instances or 'sentences' are typical of the process of communication and need to be understood within a theoretical framework, but they are not scientific facts. Recent theories of semiotics and structural linguistics teach us that meanings are always in process, always being made and remade, and are never completed facts. While it is always interesting and important to discover *which* meanings are made or preferred by texts and their socially situated readers, these meanings are never fixed and final, but are moments in the circulation of meaning within society; indeed, meanings exist only in their circulation.

Communication, then, is the study of meanings in their social circulation. Textual analysis is thus central to it. But the social dimension needs studying on two main levels – that of macro social structures, the distribution of power and resources within the social system in general, and that of the micro level where everyday life is lived and experienced. The socially conscious semiotics of Barthes and his theory of myth link textual structures with social structures. Ethno-semiotics links the reading of texts with the everyday lives of their readers.

The empirical methods outlined in this chapter should enable the reader to make some basic studies of the message and its audience. Comparing the results reached by semiotic analysis and empirical methods will raise important issues about the validity of each approach.

### Suggestions for further work

1. Analyse the content of one evening's television advertisements in order to reveal both the pattern of occupational portrayal and the setting of men and women. Compare your findings with those of Dominick and Rauch in America in the early 1970s. What similarities and differences do you notice, and what is their significance? Make a semiotic analysis of selected advertisements. Does semiotics support or contradict content analysis?

Alternatively, do this exercise on magazines – women's or men's or teenager's, whichever type interests you most.

2. Use content analysis to compare a quality with a popular daily newspaper. Use the column centimetre as your unit. You should look at the ratio of editorial:advertising matter, of print:pictures, and of the space devoted to different categories of news topics. Hartley (1982), chapter 3, suggests the following topic categories: politics, the economy, foreign affairs, domestic news (divided into *hard news* – violence, conflict, crime – and *soft news* – warm-hearted and 'women's' stories), occasional stories (disasters, royalty, etc.), and sport. How adequate do you find these categories? Do you need any more – for example showbiz? What does this analysis tell you about the readership and communicative function of each paper? See also Dyer (1982), chapter 5.
3. Discover, by content analysis, the main themes and social attitudes of the lyrics of the top twenty pop songs.
4. Use the semantic differential to identify the main connotations of the type-faces you used in question 1 of chapter 5. You should use a sample of about twenty for each test. You may find the following pairs of adjectives useful: masculine–feminine, honest–dishonest, static–dynamic, cheap–expensive, serious–humorous, modern–old-fashioned, rural–urban, formal–informal, elegant–clumsy, authoritative–frivolous, accurate–inaccurate, important–unimportant, industrial–natural, upper-class–lower-class, aggressive–non-aggressive, secure–risky (generated by one of my students, Jenny Hughes).
5. Devise a 'uses and gratifications' questionnaire to investigate the uses the audience makes of a popular television or radio programme or programme type. Ones worth investigating include soap opera, *Tom and Jerry* (or other cartoons), crime series, quiz shows, record requests, national or local news – or any sort of programme that interests you. Or you can investigate types of pop music. Remember to relate your results to social position as defined by (for example) age, sex, occupation, family status, education. Do not feel you have to use all of these – your choice will depend on what you are investigating and on your audience. Compare your results to McQuail's categories of gratification. See Corner and Hawthorn (1980), pp. 187–201.
6. Conduct a small-scale ethnographic study of how your family or friends watch television. (See Fiske, 1987, chapter 5.)