INTERNATIONAL SERIES IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

2ND EDITION

Making Sense of Television

The psychology of audience interpretation

SONIA LIVINGSTONE

Making Sense of Television

Television has become so commonplace that the meanings of its images and genres appear obvious and clear. Yet this is far from the case. Sonia Livingstone presents original research which shows that audiences interpret programmes in diverse ways, depending on their own socio-cultural contexts.

Making Sense of Television uses the soap opera, the most popular genre on television, as a particularly interesting and challenging case study to explore these issues. The book looks at the nature of the 'active viewer', the role of the text in social psychology, and investigates the existing theoretical models offered by social psychology, media studies and cultural studies.

This second edition has been completely revised and updated. It takes into account recent research and theoretical developments in fields such as narrative psychology, social representation theory, ethnographic work on audiences, and the developing role of audience research. It will be an essential study for students and lecturers in social psychology and media studies.

Sonia Livingstone is Senior Lecturer in Social Psychology and Programme Director of the MSc in Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her previous publications include *Talk on Television: Audience Participation and Public Debate* (with Peter Lunt) (1994).

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Preface to the first edition

Television has made enormous changes in people's everyday lives over the last few decades. Developments in new technologies and increased leisure time ensure that the mass media will continue to structure and influence people's experiences and understanding of their social world. The media thus pose important questions for social science. While much research has been conducted, many—if not more—problems remain.

Making Sense of Television addresses an issue central to the social psychological perspective on the mass media—how viewers interpret the programmes that they see. This raises a further set of questions concerned with social perception and representation: how do people use their everyday knowledge to guide their interpretations; how sensitive are they to structural features of a text; how far do viewers agree with the text and each other in making sense of television; do different ways of interacting with programmes lead to different interpretations; and so forth.

These questions are addressed theoretically and empirically in *Making Sense of Television.* Following a critical review of several relevant literatures—psychology, communications and literary criticism—an analysis is offered which seeks to integrate these research literatures to provide a new perspective on the audience's everyday interpretations of television. An integration of cognitive social psychology with reception theories from literary criticism is proposed as a way of analysing the processes of interpretation which mediate between television content and effects.

A body of empirical studies on viewers' interpretations of the characters and narratives of popular soap operas is presented which addresses the social perception questions outlined above and demonstrates the value of the proposed perspective. As one might expect, new questions are raised in the process, and the implications of the present analysis and findings for social psychology and mass communications are explored.

Sonia Livingstone
Oxford, 1989

Preface to the second edition

Since the first edition of this book was written nearly ten years ago, audience reception research has moved on. Many more empirical studies have been conducted, asking how different kinds of audiences make sense of different programmes in different countries. Furthermore, a considerable body of critical literature has accumulated, concerned with the theoretical and methodological difficulties which resulted from this interest in audiences. Audience reception research was taken as representative of the hopes, and problems, of interdisciplinary and multi-perspectival approaches to research in media and communications, which made the critical debates more lively than might otherwise have been expected. Most important, the set of questions which I raise in this book have become accepted research foci within media and communications—how people make sense of television, how media representations relate to or are incorporated within everyday social knowledge, how different people interpret television in different ways, and how audience interpretation is a central part of bigger stories of media influence and significance. Moreover, the audience has become visible not only within media theory but also within public opinion and policy debates, as the audience is transformed into the consumer, to be pleased, empowered by or dissatisfied with the offerings of the media.

The second edition of *Making Sense of Television* differs from the first edition in several respects. First, it has been completely revised and updated to reflect developments in audience research in the intervening years since the first edition. Second, I have used the soap opera more explicitly as a case study for the investigation of audience's sense-making processes, not just because it is an extremely popular genre around the world but, more interestingly, because it represents an atypical case of television genres, a case which pushes some traditional assumptions about television so far that these assumptions must be rethought. Its very mundaneness, the apparent obviousness of its narratives, becomes illusory on close examination; a soap opera lasts indefinitely, making all the more obvious the ways in which viewers must hold the 'text' in their memories, integrating across episodes; its multiple central characters provide no ready identification for viewers to follow but invite differential responses, perspectives and positionings; and soap opera purports to represent 'everyday life' as indeed the viewers concur, thus raising the key question for this book, namely how people's understanding in everyday life are brought to bear when making sense of television. Lastly, this new edition of *Making Sense of Television* con-

tains a completely rewritten final chapter in which I draw out more explicitly than hitherto the implications of research on viewers' understanding of soap opera for the more general question of making sense of television. In my analysis of the relations between comprehension and interpretation, I hope to clarify a number of confusions, both terminological and theoretical, within audience reception research.

Despite the fact that there is now a sizeable research literature which critically evaluates audience reception studies and which attempts to place them in a broader theoretical context, the main arguments which I advanced in the first edition of *Making Sense of Television* have not been much altered over the past few years. Particularly, the links which I identified as interesting and important between social psychology and media studies remain largely potential. In some respects, social psychology as a field has evolved since the first edition, and so more attention is given in this second edition to the relation between media audiences and the social psychological theories of social representations and discourse psychology. In general, however, I still believe that neither social psychology nor media studies has sufficiently faced the problematics which I address in this book, namely how the study of the meaning-making practices of audiences can be put together with the study of the meaning-making practices of people in their everyday lives. For the construction of everyday meanings occurs within a fundamentally mediated context, and inevitably, it is from within this context of everyday activities that people view television.

Sonia Livingstone
London, 1997

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The extract from *EastEnders* in Chapter 1 is quoted with permission of the BBC and the author, Tony McHale; the extracts from *Coronation Street* in Chapter 4 are quoted with permission of Granada Television. The figures for Table 1 in Chapter 3 were obtained from BARB/AGB, UK, and are reproduced with permission. Some of the research reported in this book has also been published in Livingstone (1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993 and in press-b).

1

The Social Psychology of the Television Viewer

The Role of Television in Everyday Life

The research for this book began with my interest in social knowledge. Many social scientists ask how people make sense of social phenomena and how they integrate new perceptions with prior knowledge and experience. My particular interest as a social psychologist was in the ways people made sense of ordinary, everyday phenomena—people and events which are complex, structured and which they experience naturally—rather than the idealised, simplified and controlled materials of experimental research. I began to think about television when searching for a domain which was both complex and yet commonplace and which was available equally to everybody without my artificially exposing people to it. For television, significantly constitutes a domain in which people ordinarily share experiences of the same complex, social 'messages'.

The research question then became, how do people make sense of television programmes, programmes which they have watched and interpreted under natural circumstances and which they have presumably integrated with their prior knowledge of the types of events and characters portrayed? Thus I arrived at the study of the media, and specifically the soap opera audience. The soap opera fitted my concerns with complex and gradually constructed knowledge representations, because it is a genre containing many familiar characters whose personalities, for example, could be contrasted and compared by the audience. Thus the soap opera serves as the case study for the broader exploration of the role of the media in producing and reproducing social knowledge. Incidentally, the soap opera also appealed because it has been regarded as the underdog of television programming (and, until recently, of television research). Yet, its unusually sympathetic portrayal of dominant women is often considered by women viewers to be realistic and engaging. I wondered if these points were related.

At the same time, I had been reading Goffman for his attack in *Forms of Talk* on the speaker–hearer metaphor which dominates the psychology of communication, for his attempt to recognise the complexity of the relation between com-

municator and audience (for example, by including the bystander, the colluder and the eavesdropper). His was also an attack on the communication as stimulus, on the recipient of communication as unengaged, neutral. And it was an attack on cognition as asocial. He even compared mass mediated contexts for social interaction with face-to-face ones. Thus he opened the way for analyses which reveal the institutional constraints operating in face-to-face contexts as well as those which reveal the informalities, accidents even, which frame mediated communication (e.g. Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; Thompson, 1996).

Thus my concern developed into one of linking the specific study of the media's relation to the social knowledge of its audience to a broader analysis of conceptions of social knowledge within social psychology. The relatively narrow treatment of the mass media within social psychology seemed to be symptomatic of social psychology's turn away from the social and from its interface with sociology, and towards the cognitive and experimental. Thus, the mass media, as they typically appear in psychology textbooks for example, are seen as a source of biased messages, as a convenient and apparently neutral sample of the beliefs and attitudes in society, or as a channel of social influence which simply supplements or overrides face-to-face influence (e.g. Howitt, 1982; Kimble, 1990; Smith and Mackie, 1995; Wallbott, 1996), assuming that they appear at all (e.g. Brown, 1986). The links between institutions of cultural meaning production and discursive contexts of reception, even when too simply translated into psychology's terms as the link between processes of influence and of knowledge, have been largely ghettoised into the media effects tradition (or, at the most, into the literature on persuasion) and so neglected elsewhere by social psychology. As I shall discuss later, the legacy of the problematic effects tradition thus serves as a counterpoint against which other kinds of social psychology of audiences, both newer and older, are frequently understood. The emergence of new traditions within social psychology, particularly traditions which explicitly embrace the links between language and context, influence and interpretation, and which attempt to resocialise social psychology, may provide an alternative and more productive context for the development of a social psychology of media audiences.

While having such broad theoretical concerns in mind, empirical research must home in on a particular domain. One advantage of selecting the soap opera was that such research mirrored the public and academic debates at the time. Thus, while the world was asking, 'Who shot J.R.?' and while the church and politicians were asking whether contemporary morality was promoted nowadays more by the soap opera than by traditional public institutions, academics also had become fascinated by this hitherto most despised of television genres. Indeed, there was a 'soap opera boom' going on around me: in research, in public discussion, in audience ratings. Soap opera was the 'in thing'. And as I listened to the debates (though I had to seek them out, they were not to be found in Oxford!), it became clear that soap opera was the connection I had sought—between the problems of studying the role of complex, everyday, social knowl-

edge and the problems of assuming a simple speaker–hearer model of communication in both social psychology and media studies. In soap opera, there is no simple speaker–hearer relationship although nor is the relationship simply one of passive reception: viewers are engaged in 'parasocial interactions', *as if* engaging with real people, they participate without passive identification, they blur boundaries between viewing and living by endless 'what happened then' discussions and by bringing their everyday experience to judge the drama. And the genre invites all this. Further, within the programmes, there is no simple message to be passively received, but a cacophony of voices, of colluders and eavesdroppers, of bystanders and involved protagonists with their own histories and perspectives. Any 'message' is an outcome of all this. Moreover, 'the message' is inevitably made plural, open to interpretation.

People were arguing that this is because soap opera is a 'feminine' genre: there is no dominant, linear, closed message; no orderly, authoritative meaning. The matriarchal content and the multifaceted and nonlinear form are related. And they both posed a fascinating challenge to social psychology, for whom people are traditionally gender stereotyped, seekers after simplicity and order, linear information-processors of unitary messages. How could social psychology rise to the challenge of 'filling in' a much needed conceptualisation of the newly active viewer of television, thereby not only benefiting from the application of social psychology to the media but also benefiting the media literature in turn? Could the social psychology of implicit representation and social knowledge provide the theoretical repertoire and resource for conceptualising the active viewers' own interpretative repertoires and resources? And, to return to my original problem, what could all this tell us about the role of everyday social knowledge as applied to common yet complex, ordinary experiences of the world?

As the soap opera debate matured, it became more focused. It centred on the text–reader metaphor—analysing television and its audience by analogy to the semiotic approach to literature (whose audience is the literary critics themselves). This involved a reconceptualisation of both programmes and viewers, and it challenged traditional methodologies. I recognised that this specific focus was pertinent to social psychology more generally: that we needed to replace the stimulus with the text, the information processor with the interpreter, and psychological reductionism with a sociocultural context. What are the implications of this metaphor, as it has been applied to media studies, within the field of social psychology and the problems of social knowledge and everyday sense-making? I have suggested here that it was the possibilities raised through analysis of the soap opera genre in particular which spurred on research on the active audience during the 1980s, particularly as regards the usefulness of the text–reader metaphor (as I shall elaborate later). However, several other television genres were simultaneously being investigated for their reception among audiences. Specific comparative analysis across genres is yet to be conducted; indeed, many television genres still await investigation. Clearly, the emerging

theorisation of active and interpretative audiences is presumed to apply to television audiences generally, although differences in the reception of different genres will remain significant. Let us first consider the significance of sense-making, the role of television, and some problems of social psychological and media research, thus mapping out the scope and aims of this book.

The Centrality of Interpretation

All day, every day, people create and recreate meanings in their everyday lives. Whether they are working, talking to their children, watching television, judging the weather, planning a meal or playing a record, people routinely and apparently unproblematically make sense of their circumstances. Yet as we think through this activity of making sense, we see that it is far from unproblematic. Even the simplest utterance requires considerable work to perceive the utterance as meaningful, to understand its relation to its context and to judge the appropriate response. And everyday life is far from simple. Perhaps one should say, everyday life is often simple to carry out, but rarely simple to analyse.

Just as with everyday interactions, watching television has often been seen as a routine, unproblematic, passive process: the meanings of programmes are seen as given and obvious; the viewer is seen as passively receptive and mindless. Again, this simplicity is illusory. In recent years, both interpersonal and mediated communication have been increasingly recognised as a complex, rule-governed, constructive set of processes. People's role in such communications must be correspondingly understood as knowledgeable, skilled, motivated, and diverse.

Social psychologists have devoted much attention to revealing the complexities of everyday, apparently transparent, social situations. They have examined the patterns of social interaction and the rules of social situations which give meaning to everyday interactions. They have focused on the social knowledge needed by participants in interactions, the narrative patternings which order everyday events, the subtleties of conversations, and the power of different types of groups. While many areas of everyday life have come under scrutiny, the central place of the mass media has been largely neglected. Yet television has come to dominate the hours in our day, the organisation of our living rooms, the topics of our conversations, our conceptions of pleasure, the things to which we look forward, the way we amuse and occupy our children, and the way we discover the world we live in. Many also argue that television has come to dominate what we think, how we think, and what we think about. In short, the ever increasing amounts of time spent watching television should not be underestimated. Figures on the actual numbers of hours spent watching television vary from around 20 to 40 hours per week, depending both on socio-demographic factors and on the definition used for 'watching' television.

How are we to think about the relationship between television and everyday social life? A powerful common-sense assumption, which has influenced psy-

chologists as well as popular thinking, has been that the two are quite separate: everyday life is real, important, and factual while television is unreal, trivial, and fantastic. Yet television has become inextricably part of, and often indistinguishable from, everyday life. We often do not remember whether we learnt of a certain fact from a friend or television, we fail to notice that our images of the elderly, for example, derive more from television than everyday interactions, and when we recount an anecdote or interesting observation, does it matter if it came from watching television or from a personal experience? Can we argue, then, that despite the physical difference between television images and 'real-life' perceptions, symbolically they are the same? Each is perceived through the same, or at least, heavily overlapping, interpretative frameworks. Both face-to-face and mediated interactions can be seen as providing people with texts to be interpreted, and in both situations, people are the readers, whether they read the concerns of their actual family, for example, or those of the situation comedy family.

I do not mean here to refer to the study of those who confuse television and everyday life. There has been much discussion of those who send wreaths to soap opera funerals or apply for jobs in the soap opera café, asking whether such people are in fact deluded or instead whether their actions have been interpreted too literally rather than seen as gestures of participation and pleasure. My concern is not whether television is indistinguishable from everyday life but whether the symbolic role of each can be better understood in a similar rather than an oppositional fashion.

Let us think further about the interpretative or sense-making process. Many of the conventional frames by which television is structured differ according to programme genre: for example, recency signifies importance, a close-up shot signifies intimacy, fast cutting signifies high drama. Similarly one may see life too as having certain interpretative frames or genres dependent on different situations (Argyle *et al.*, 1981; Goffman, 1974). Research on the rules–roles approach to social situations or the script theory approach to event sequences (Sampson, 1991) are analogous to work on media genres (Fiske, 1987) in that here social psychologists are similarly engaged in defining the conventional structures and hence interpretive overlap between media and interpersonal situations (such as, height signifies importance, proximity signifies intimacy or threat, the ritualised openings and resolutions to sequences, the use of gender-stereotyped connotations).

One might protest that people use different interpretative frames for television and everyday life, that they can maintain a distance from the former, bracketing it off from the latter as unreal. This is doubtful as a general claim on several grounds, although clearly it occurs sometimes. Careful analysis of people's reception of television programmes—to be discussed later—reveals the complex intertwining which takes place between television and everyday meanings. Conversations around the set tend not to discriminate among these meanings, and viewers frequently interpret the television referentially, as if it referred to outside events or ideas. Conversely, they also bring to their interpre-

tation ideas and recalled events which they have encountered, to provide a context for the television meanings (Liebes and Katz, 1990).

The relevance of everyday knowledge to the interpretation of television images, while rather neglected for adult audiences hitherto, has been clearly recognised for child audiences. Thus, children's misconceptions about television programmes reveal the interpretative 'work' successfully conducted by adult viewers. For example, Dorr (1986) and Hodge and Tripp (1986) discuss children's confusions about such televisual codes as special effects, ellipsis and action replay. More important, the parallels between the development of their understanding of everyday social life and of television images of everyday life indicate that children are using a common knowledge base to understand both television and everyday reality. For example, Collins (1983) shows how developing conceptions of causality are used to understand television narratives, and Christenson (1986) shows how drawing moral conclusions from such narratives depends on the child's own moral development.

Psychologically it does not seem plausible that our assumptions, images and knowledge of the world portrayed by television can be strictly separated from our assumptions, images and knowledge of everyday life. Further, while people may on some occasions distance themselves from television meanings, so too may they distance themselves from everyday meanings, withholding judgement, withdrawing trust, rejecting assumptions: television is not thereby inherently different from other social meanings. A parallel argument can be made for the claim that people do not attend to television as they do to interpersonal events. True, people often sleep in front of the television set, talk over it, forget it after five minutes, and treat it as 'moving wallpaper'. But the same could be said for interpersonal events, where people are often inattentive or 'mindless' (Langer *et al.,* 1978). If we avoid this polarised comparison, we can begin to focus on the more productive questions of when, where and why people attend or ignore—under what conditions are viewers active or passive or are people mindful or mindless? In sum, although in some ways people may frame television as different and thus draw upon different interpretive conventions, the very activity of framing, or applying conventions to the act of interpretation, is a common activity across media and interpersonal interactions and thus the analysis of each may reveal much about the other.

In many ways, the very tangibility of television makes it easier to study these issues than otherwise. Its programmes are more accessible, although no less complex, than are the texts of everyday conversations and its images offer a clearer source of social representations than the representations and repertoires shared by social groups. Certainly, television programmes provide more complex and naturalistic texts for social perception, attribution and stereotyping research than the artificial scenarios often used by social psychology. The fact–fiction distinction has been a hindrance to theorising. Not only is it increasingly meaningful to see life as fiction, as games or as ritual, but also psychologically both television and 'life' are to the participating individual equally a

source of meaning. Thus each must be interpreted according to the same wealth of social knowledge derived from, in a cyclic fashion, his or her previous experiences with both everyday life and television-in-life.

To focus, then, on the television programme as text is to recognise the complex interrelationships among aspects of meaning, the cultural practices on which they depend, and the requirements placed on the person who makes sense of them. In other words, to use the metaphor of the text in relation to television is to emphasise that programmes are structured, culturally-located, symbolic products to be understood only in relation to readers and which, together with readers, generate meanings. Can we also see life as text? This metaphor of the text, with its associated concept of the reader, is intended to counter the prevailing notions of life as external stimulus, person as respondent, with their associated notions of clear, unique and given meanings and the passive, powerless image of the person. As I will argue, such notions have served to delimit and impede developments in social psychology and media studies. How far then can the concepts of text and reader offer a way forward in thinking about the relation between television and life and in thinking about the interpretative role of the person in each? This book will explore the value of these concepts.

The Related Histories of Social Psychology and Media Studies

Media studies should, I suggest, be more to social psychology than a subsection of an undergraduate course or an optional chapter in a textbook. Its theories and findings may relate to, draw upon, and contribute to a broad range of social psychological issues—from social influence, attitude–behaviour research, social perception, discourse analysis, social representations, non-verbal communication, and so forth. Moreover, media studies are here to stay, and social psychology must resolve its relationship with them.

Although at different points in this book I will specifically address a literature in social psychology or in media studies, each argument offered is intended to have implications for the other or to draw links between historically separate literatures whose concerns and concepts are more similar than is often recognised. The book is thus something of a balancing act, in which I will juggle with social psychology—specifically, social cognition (Augoustinos and Walker, 1995) and recent developments in social representations (Farr and Moscovici, 1984) and discourse theory (Potter and Wetherell, 1987), and media studies—spanning the split between traditional sociological research and critical mass communications or cultural studies insofar as both deal with audiences (Fejes, 1984; Katz, 1980). It is hoped that the mutual boundary between these disciplines will become increasingly fuzzy and permeable in regard to audiences and interpreters of everyday social texts.

As each discipline reaches its own internal 'crisis' (see Parker, 1989, for the crisis in social psychology), a period of rethinking is taking place. This book is

intended as a contribution to both these arenas of rethinking simultaneously. The metaphor of the text and reader will be offered as a route forward. Ironically, while at the beginning of the research for this book, the text–reader metaphor seemed to offer a new solution to replace the tired notions of stimulus and effect, the field of audience reception research has moved so rapidly that it now seems almost to have moved beyond this concept. As I shall argue later, in making the important move to (re)contextualise the text–reader interaction in its everyday domestic locales, audience studies are now in danger yet again of losing the importance of the moment of text–reader interaction for the analysis of cultural meanings. From the vantage point of hindsight, I would still insist on a thorough analysis of the moment of engagement between text and reader, while recognising that this moment itself must be understood within a more ethnographic framework which contextualises television viewing as part of everyday life (Silverstone, 1994). However, to reduce the potential breadth of concerns, the book will centre upon viewers' interpretations of a specific genre of television programming, the soap opera. As we shall see, this genre exemplifies many key concepts and problems. It thus constitutes a convenient point of intersection for otherwise diverse research domains.

This chapter will pursue the question of the relation between media and everyday life in several ways. First, I will examine the historical changes in the relation between the two disciplines of media studies and social psychology. Second, the vast body of research on the impact of television will be selectively reviewed to illustrate the various approaches taken to the relationship between media and everyday social life, revealing the importance of the theme of 'making sense'. And finally, recent work on social cognition, psychology's approach to sense-making, will be discussed in terms of its potential and problems, arguing for the inseparability of making sense of television and making sense of everyday life. Issues of audience interpretation or cognitive activity and the nature of the text–reader relationship are further explored in Chapter 2.

However, while advocating improved relations between media studies and social psychology, it must be acknowledged that boundaries are often disturbingly impervious. Mainstream social psychology has long resisted arguments about the importance of language in social life (Rommetweit, 1984), despite the rise of socio-linguistics, of the philosophy of language, and of linguistic anthropology in the last few decades. At the same time, the boundaries are more permeable than is often recognised. Although social psychology and media studies have their own journals and, in America, their own departments and courses, their history is highly interrelated. Smith (1983) tells the history of the two in terms of a common pre-war origin and a separate subsequent development. On the other hand, Reeves *et al.* (1982) argue that most social psychological developments feed into mass communications such that the history of media studies is the history of social psychology, at least in America. Of course, media studies draws upon a range of disciplines, including sociology, political science, literary criticism and anthropology. Yet in terms of broad developmen-

tal stages, the links with social psychology are strong (see also Farr, 1996; Livingstone, 1997a).

Modern social psychology may be very roughly characterised as beginning with the attitude/opinion research of the 1930s and 1940s, spawned by immigration, war and propaganda agencies and concerned with the formation of public opinion, the vulnerability of attitudes to external influences, and the structures of social beliefs (see Farr, 1996; Smith, 1983). This led to the newly formed academic departments' interest in the cognitive persuasion research of the fifties, focusing on the thought processes of the target of persuasion and revealing his or her defences, motivations to selectively attend to certain messages, and autonomous processes of attitude formation (see Berkowitz, 1978). The Behaviourism of the sixties represented an abrupt break from mentalistic and semantic concerns, examining instead the dependence of people on the structures of their environment and their patterns of learning from that environment (Bandura and Walters, 1964). The seventies were beset by crises and splitting (Harré and Secord, 1972), with a profusion of critiques sometimes more destructive than constructive, although a return to cognitivism and the rise of influential new concerns were also salient. The eighties and nineties reveal attempts at new developments and convergence.

If this broad-brush sketch of major trends is accepted, despite the many inevitable exceptions, then it would appear that social psychology and media studies, at least in their American versions, have shared a similar fate. Katz (1980) described mass communications research as a history of oscillation between conceptions of powerful media and powerful viewers. The mass society thesis of the Frankfurt school of the thirties and forties, with its visions of a helpless mass audience of isolated and oppressed individuals gave way to the 'two-step flow model' of the fifties, with its contrasting conception of the audience as selective, as organised in social groups with opinion leaders buffering the impact of the media and providing alternative world views (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). This was followed by a return to powerful media with the experimental Behaviourist research conceiving of innocent and ignorant children, helplessly moulded into their social roles (Bandura and Walters, 1964), including antisocial roles involving aggression and fear, which again gave way in the seventies to the selective, discriminating viewer of Uses and Gratifications research, deciding what to watch according to prior needs, moulding the media to fit his or her own desires (Blumler and Katz, 1974).

While traditional mass communications theory, practised largely by American sociologists, was oscillating between powerful media and powerful viewers, a separate strand of research developed out of the Frankfurt school which took a more consistent position (see Katz, 1987). Critical mass communications (Gitlin, 1978) advocated powerful media and influential texts, giving little attention to the role of the audience except as helpless pawns receiving fixed messages and circulating them through society (Fejes, 1984). As I shall discuss further, this approach adopted a more Marxist and literary focus, con-

cerned with the role of the media in the reproduction of ideology and with detailed analyses of the 'true', hidden meanings of media texts (e.g. Bennett, 1990; Newcomb, 1987).

Interestingly, if we turn to contemporary developments in social psychology, an oscillation between active and passive may also be seen to structure the history of social psychology. However, the focus is more on the person, there being no obvious 'other' to parallel the media (although many have been nominated—such as social institutions, reinforcement agencies, real world logic). So, responding to the broad concern of the mass society thesis of people helpless in the face of hegemonic propaganda and persuasion, social psychology moved through a more developed cognitivism, with selective perception, the 'new look' with its emphasis on constructive perception, and with consistency and dissonance theories, only to succumb to Behaviourism and the return of the passive individual written upon by circumstances and open to manipulation. Then came the return of the socially located individual with social identity theory (Tajfel 1978), of the skilled interpreter with nonverbal communication and rules–roles theories (Argyle *et al.*, 1981), of the minority who could fight back against the conformity processes exerted by the majority (Moscovici, 1976). In this context, it seems curious that while both media analysis and social psychology are currently concerned with the active construction of cultural meanings, the main approach of social psychology to the media remains ultimately concerned with its effects upon the audience. Although the 'effects' approach (Bryant and Zillman, 1993; Halloran, 1970; Hovland, Janis and Kelley, 1953), narrowly defined as experimental and behaviouristic, is currently unfashionable (see below), it remains nonetheless a key question underlying research on audiences. Certainly a consideration of effects research is needed in order to trace the historical and theoretical connections between media studies and social psychology (Livingstone, 1996; Livingstone, 1997a). Returning to the question posed earlier about the relationship between television and everyday life, one could regard effects research as proposing a clear distinction between the two and then examining the extent to which the former influences the latter. If we undermine this opposition, then we must replace the oversimplified question of effects with a far more complex analysis of the construction of social knowledge.

There has been considerable recent interest in interpretation or decoding across a wide range of media theories which parallels the rise of social cognition within psychology (Augoustinos and Walker, 1995). These clearly undermine the distinction between television and everyday life, suggesting instead that television is an integral part of everyday life and that the meanings or world view of the one are not different in kind from the meanings of the other. The assumption of a clear television versus life distinction has caused problems for effects research, suggesting that the very question of how television affects life is an inappropriate one. Can it be replaced by the question of the relative power to negotiate the social construction of meanings not between television and life but between texts and readers?