

COMMUNICATION YEARBOOK 14

Edited by
James A. Anderson



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THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION

The International Communication Association was formed in 1950, bringing together academicians and other professionals whose interest focused on human communication. The Association maintains an active membership of more than 2,200 individuals, of which some two-thirds are teaching and conducting research in colleges, universities, and schools around the world. Other members are in government, the media, communication technology, business law, medicine, and other professions. The wide professional and geographical distribution of the membership provides the basic strength of the ICA. The Association is a meeting ground for sharing research and useful dialogue about communication interests.

Through its Divisions and Interest Groups, publications, annual conferences, and relations with other associations around the world, ICA promotes the systematic study of communication theories, processes, and skills.

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PREFACE

Once again, and for the last time under this editor's stewardship, *Yearbook* authors have prepared a rich sampling of the subjects and perspectives of communication. As is our tradition, authors have offered rugged claim up for comment in a robust critical activity. Chapters are coupled with commentaries that critique, support, and extend, but always engage the primary issues. These are lively exchanges. This volume is divided into four sections. In the paragraphs that follow, I present a brief overview of each section and its articles.

Klaus Bruhn Jensen opens this volume with yet another assault on the centrality of text in media analyses and participates in what appears to be a widespread rediscovery of Charles Sanders Peirce as well as the rehabilitation of pragmatism in the project of empowering the audience. Jensen empowers the audiences of media by granting them interpretive rights supported in social action. For his comment on Jensen, John Fiske examines the fit between the social action perspective and Peircean semiotics and finds it wanting. He argues that Saussurean semiology is more appropriate to the social action perspective. For his part, Horace Newcomb proclaims Jensen's argument noble but flawed and, more important, limited by its own moment of appearance.

Karl Erik Rosengren takes advantage of the 15-year history of a media research program conducted with both panel and cross-sectional methodologies to produce an analysis of the structural invariants of media use as explained by development, social class, and socialization processes. The power of this analysis is shown as consistent patterns emerge despite an era of great technological introduction and change. Commentator Cecilia von Feilitzen takes up particular methodological issues in the manner of measurement and in the comparison of panel and cross-sectional data collections. She argues for even stronger conclusions concerning consistency. John Murray, on the other hand, cautions against the conclusions that Rosengren does draw, noting the considerable instability that his own research shows. For my own part, this set of three arguments shows the contributions that different methodological approaches make to the knowledge claims advanced.

In this era, when cultural studies seem intent on capturing center stage of social issues in media analysis, Denis McQuail offers an approach from the perspective of traditional social science by creating a "hybrid of the the social responsibility and empiricist schools of criticism." Working from the normative principles of freedom, equality, and order, McQuail argues that objective measures of performance can be applied to media assessment and provides specific examples of this application. But for commentator Douglas Birkhead, McQuail's work is much too sanitized—too far removed from the political, ideological, moral, and historical engagement that successful criticism requires. Birkhead claims that objective measures become assessment criteria only in the push and shove of social and moral interaction. Jan Servaes finds the value of McQuail's analysis in the study of the rationalistic issues of the news. Such issues do not capture the heart of the

ideation process of which news is a part, however. The analysis of that process must also press against the nonrational—the issues of subjectivity, ethnicity, and cultural mythology, as well as ideology.

The chapter by Jeremy Tunstall and the companion piece by James Danowski work a special form to enlarge the industrial view of media production and organizational activity. Tunstall wants us to consider the intraorganizational character and the extraorganizational structure of media industries as ways of understanding the media product distributed. In his principal argument, Tunstall claims that national industries are remarkably different from one another (differences most often not properly understood) and at the same time moving toward a global market. Danowski takes Tunstall's analysis and casts it as a specific example in his theory of organizations' media behavior. Time- and space-shifting media are organizational resources which are put to different work depending on the organization's inward or outward orientation. The media industries, with their domestic peculiarities and global commonalities, offer a profitable site of analysis.

J. Michael Sproule begins the section on propaganda and public opinion with a second look at the American critical impulse in media studies. He contrasts Marxist critical interests in class and the state with American interests in private institutions and their professional propagandists. He traces the history of propaganda studies as they moved from the critical to the rational and from being called *propaganda* studies to being called *communication* studies to their present redeployment in a post-Vietnam, postmodern mode of critique. He argues that the present critical movement is unknowing of its active American past and could benefit from that knowledge. Garth Jowett works the history of the American progressives' response to the introduction of the movies to provide for an examination of the value of European critical thought for the analysis of American institutions. He, like Sproule, finds the application strained. Raymie McKerrow, on the other hand, finds difficulties in the application of progressive criticism. For him, the progressives were propagandists in their own right, practicing what they preached against, which prevents their critical approach from being useful in the postmodern project of the analysis of the discourse of power.

Chapters 6 and 7 complete a project on public opinion and agenda-setting begun in *Communication Yearbook 11*. In Chapter 6, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann provides a comprehensive statement on the spiral of silence as a theory of the public opinion process. In this extension of her seminal work, Noelle-Neumann presents new evidence from her ongoing research program in support of the central tenets of the theory. She includes a discussion of the role of media in opinion formation and concludes with an analysis of the design requirements for opinion research. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi enlarges Noelle-Neumann's analysis by examining the prior issues of social integration and individual conformity. His analysis examines how value resources and agents of action vary across cultures and how individuals within cultures differentially assimilate public opinion into personal action. Serge Moscovici contrasts Noelle-Neumann's emphasis on the manner by which common opinions emerge with his question of why deviant positions sometimes

overcome common ones. Referencing the remarkable recent changes in Eastern Europe, he postulates sturdy dissident positions that survive even under the dominant ideological cover and emerge opportunistically when that cover cracks.

Stephen Reese's chapter reaches back to Rogers and Dearing's review of agenda-setting research that appeared in volume 11 of the *Yearbook* to answer their call for an analysis of the process that sets the media's agenda. At the top of the process, he argues for a symbiotic relationship in which elite media and the political elite are resources for one another, neither consistently dominant over the other. Elite media, rather than the political elite, however, are more likely to set the agenda for the less elite of the industry. He also notes that the present is a time of restructuring of the media industry, with signs abounding of loss of power among its elite, particularly broadcast media. Both of Reese's commentators move aggressively to deconstruct the concept of agenda-setting. Lee Becker begins by calling our understanding of the agenda concept into question. For him, the concept serves no good purpose, particularly in the study of content creation. D. Charles Whitney would appear to agree. He rejects the idea of an orderly arrangement of agenda-setting and advances the notion that content creation occurs in a set of contingent relations. On the other hand, both commentators commend Reese's use of power as the primary explanatory device.

Sara Newell and Randall Stutman move us into the realm of interpersonal studies in their investigation of social confrontation. Taking both interactionist and cognitivist perspectives, Newell and Stutman provide a description and examples of the roles and structures of this type of conversational episode. In his engagement of Newell and Stutman's piece, Joseph Folger considers the role that culturally shared interpretations play in the development of claims about conversational structure. He contrasts this approach with one requiring an intimate knowledge of the participants' world. Taken from the latter perspective, episodic boundaries of confrontation can disappear into an ongoing practice of a relationship. G. H. Morris seeks to place Newell and Stutman's analysis in his larger construct of "alignment talk." For him, social confrontation is an attempt to achieve an appropriate definition of proper conduct. Morris also believes that we can best study these attempts in the close reading of their actual performance.

Actual performances are also the "right stuff" for Mary Louise Willbrand and Richard Rieke in their analysis of logic in use and strategies of reasoning. Focusing on reason giving as a discursive performance in support of some action, Willbrand and Rieke develop a grounded typology of reasons from the performances of young children, teenagers, and adults. Commonalities and developmental changes are identified. These typologies are compared across other respondent groups, including cross-cultural and mentally impaired subjects. As might be expected, substantial differences were found between the grounded taxonomies of all respondent groups and the formal categories of logic or compliance-gaining theories. Donald Tibbits compares these reason-giving performances with the constructs of critical thinking. He finds in critical thinking an underlying understanding for the strategies motivating the reasons given. Stephen Toulmin, on the other hand, points

out that the procedures used by Willbrand and Rieke are not as clearly connected to “reasoning” per se as may appear. Reason giving is a language game governed not only by cognitive processes but also by, among other influences, the cultural rules of discursive performance; in fact, some reason giving may not be reasoning at all.

Michael Sunnafrank examines the time-honored claim that similarity—birds of a feather—is the basis for initiating and continuing relationships. His conclusion is that there is little support for this claim when similarity is considered a trait—rather than a practice—of the relation. His counterclaim is that it is discursive strategies that function to encourage and maintain relationships by managing the potentials for attraction and repulsion. He argues further that there are but a few critical areas in any relationship where similarity or dissimilarity is crucial to relationship survival and encourages research focus on communication practices and the critical areas of agreement in a relationship.

Arthur Bochner’s reply is that even this enlightened view saves too much of the attraction paradigm. To Bochner, it is clear that the evidence in favor results from experimental protocols with little mundane validity. He rejects the individualistic and rationalistic ideology that the attraction paradigm seems to embrace. Steven McDermott takes a different tack altogether, by looking at similarity and dissimilarity as different engines of attraction in intra- and intercultural settings. His review would support their strategic management in attraction and repulsion.

In the sole chapter in the final section of this volume, Mark Peterson and Ritch Sorenson provide an extensive review of the cognitive/contextual literature on leadership in the service of developing an overarching model. They work their way through the evidence in support of 13 propositions in which leadership behavior is explained by a combination of the cognitive scripts and schemata of the leader and the traits, practices, and resources of the organizational setting. Their argument is very much a hybrid that poaches from traditional and nontraditional claims in an attempt to build a predictable world on a foundation of contingencies. G. Lloyd Drecksel argues that Peterson and Sorenson’s argument is premature, and that they have jumped into an epistemic explanation with inadequate ontological footing. She asks, “What is leadership, and where would we find it? By what metaphors and to what ends is our research directed?” Beverly Davenport Sypher undercuts the cognitive and causal basis of Peterson and Sorenson’s position by arguing that interpretation and its practices are at the center of an adequate explanation of leadership. It is not in the study of cognitive states but of communication strategies by which we will come to an understanding of leadership.

Sypher’s comment brings us back to the beginning of this volume and Jensen’s concern for meaning production. In the main, the thrust of this volume is toward discursive practices—the strategic and tactical production and interpretation of text. And it moves some distance closer to the position that both production and interpretation are themselves best understood as discursive practices. It is a move that for me brings into clearer focus the proper phenomena of communication study.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This volume is dedicated to Chris Metts, an associate of the *Yearbook*, whose courage in facing death both humbled and inspired. It is also dedicated to the 150 or so authors and dozens of reviewers who created the four volumes of my editorship. Together we experienced the human struggle of scholarship. Julie Brown experienced that struggle a bit more than others by serving her second term as the *Yearbook's* editorial associate. She did so superbly. The staff and scholarly community of the Department of Communication at the University of Utah contributed to this volume and to each of the three preceding volumes in immeasurable ways, particularly Ann Castleton, Jennifer Duignan, and Leonard Leckie. Finally, I am delighted that the *Yearbook* is being passed into the capable hands of Stan Dectz.

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SECTION 1

MEDIA STUDIES: AUDIENCES, INDUSTRIES, AND ASSESSMENT

1 When Is Meaning? Communication Theory, Pragmatism, and Mass Media Reception

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This chapter offers an outline of a social semiotics of mass communication and defines meaning simultaneously as a social and as a discursive phenomenon. The argument draws its concepts of signs, discursive differences, and interpretive communities from the philosophical pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce in order to move beyond the essentialistic notions of meaning that characterize much previous communication theory, both in the social sciences and in cultural studies. Mass-mediated signs give rise *not* to a transmission of entities of meaning, but to specific processes of reception that are performed by the audience acting as cultural agents or interpretive communities. As audiences engage in socially specific practices of reception, mass media come to function as institutions-to-think-with. Empirical research has served to question notions of mass media as a relatively autonomous cultural forum in which polysemic messages lend themselves to diverse audience uses and pleasures. The polysemy of audience discourses, indeed, suggests the prevalence of contradictory forms of consciousness that tend to reproduce a dominant construction of social reality. Critical social theory in a pragmatic mode, emphasizing the interested and future-oriented character of scientific analysis, can help to indicate how and to what extent audiences may make a social difference.

THROUGH reference to the category of *reception*, mass communication studies of the 1980s began to reexamine some fundamental issues concerning the nature and origins of meaning in human communication. Whereas audiences have been the object of continuous and substantial study since

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Research for this chapter was conducted, in part, during 1988-89, when I was a Fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies at the Annenberg School of Communications, University of Southern California; I wish to acknowledge the support of both the ACLS and colleagues at the Annenberg School. Part of the chapter was presented as a paper to the Charles Sanders Peirce Sesquicentennial International Congress, Harvard University, September 5-10, 1989. Other sections were given as lectures at the University of Utah, University of Wisconsin—Madison, Pennsylvania State University, and University of Kentucky during February 1989.

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the beginnings of the field, current work implies a reconceptualization of mass communication processes as everyday practices producing and circulating meaning in society, particularly emphasizing the constitutive role of audiences as interpretive agents. The attention given to the decoding and social uses of media content has been apparent both in empirical research on audience responses and in cultural studies about media discourses. Further, it has entailed a dialogue across the critical-empirical, qualitative-quantitative boundaries of the field (Jensen, 1987; Jensen & Rosengren, in press; Schröder, 1987). The turn toward reception is, perhaps, most distinctively articulated in the recent tradition of qualitative empirical audience studies (Ang, 1985; Jensen, 1986; Katz & Liebes, 1984; Lindlof, 1987; Lull, 1988b; Morley, 1980, 1986; Radway, 1984), which have accumulated evidence that mass media audiences make their own sense of media content in complex and unexpected ways. Audiences may, to a significant degree, modify or oppose the specific meanings that appear to be proffered by mass media, and may, furthermore, appropriate those meanings for alternative ends as they engage in a questioning and reconstruction of social reality.

Behind this reconceptualization lies the as yet undeveloped assumption that meaning is simultaneously a *social* and a *discursive* phenomenon. On the one hand, meaning may be defined as the outcome of an interest-driven, situated act of interpretation performed by a social agent. This definition locates meaning in the real world of people, power, and pleasures. On the other hand, meaning traditionally is associated with particular vehicles — texts or other discursive forms. Discourse theory may be said to suggest that subjects and social realities are primarily functions of the operations of discourse, so that, for analytical purposes, media audiences should also be conceptualized as discourses or, perhaps, discursive strategies of interpretation. It is this duality of the concept of meaning that may, in part, account for the major ambiguities and conflicts over how to approach communication, both theoretically and methodologically, that have emerged in some recent attempts to take stock of reception analysis (for instance, see *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1988; and *Cultural Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1988). (The reader may also wish to see Jensen, 1986, chap. 10, which offers a model of discourses and further serves to introduce the focus of my argument.)

Levels of Discourse

While recognizing the distinction between media discourses, such as television programs, and various types of audience discourses, such as decodings of or conversations about television, empirical reception studies have challenged the assumption that media discourses are somehow primary and that they narrowly constrain the meanings voiced in audience discourses. Instead, both forms of discourse can be said to represent moments or manifestations of the wider category of social meaning production. Even if studies have shifted the relative empirical emphasis toward the audience, the perspective has been one of audience-cum-content analysis, incorporating the discourses of empirical media users, which have

often been absent in critical and cultural studies, as well as the structures of content, which, at least in the sense of culturally coded discourses, fall outside the scope of most social scientific research. Thus reception analysis seeks to account for mass media as social resources of meaning that may lend a sense of purpose to political, cultural, and other practices.

How to study the multiple *discourses* of mass communication with reference to an analytical level of discourse where evidence can be categorized and reflected upon is perhaps the main point of contention in recent debates. According to Lull (1988a), one of the foremost tasks for audience research is to develop *metadiscourses*, in the sense of systematic descriptive procedures that specify research designs, forms of evidence, and bases of inference. His underlying concern is with the social aspect of meaning, with people who engage a material and political reality through cultural forms of understanding that, significantly, are accessible for scientific analysis. In the next procedural step, the evidence may be assigned explanatory value from the perspective of a particular *theoretical discourse*, which is the third discursive level of reception analysis. In the words of Anderson and Meyer (1988), "It is method that generates the facts that become evidence within theory" (p. 292).

In contrast, some cultural theorists suggest that the above approach tends to reify particular conceptions of media, recipients, and discourses (Allor, 1988; Grossberg, 1988). They want to shift the focus of the debate to a further, fourth level of *epistemological discourse*. From this perspective, a continuous process of self-reflection may come into play regarding the precise status of audience discourses and media discourses, the interrelations among multiple discourses, as well as the analytical stance of the researcher who also works in and through discourses. Emphasizing the discursive aspect of meaning, such an enterprise would aim constantly to deconstruct and reconstruct the subject positions within discourse from which media might be said to make sense, either for "audiences" or for "researchers."

However, whereas the level of epistemological discourse represents an important feedback mechanism in a discourse-based approach to reception analysis, analysts who insist on staying within the epistemological loop jeopardize their claim to a discursive position from which they might address mass communication as an aspect of social reality. For example, Grossberg's (1988) advance reservations about the validity of Radway's (1988) proposal to study the cultural practices of a single heterogeneous community to move beyond predefined notions of popular cultural forms, historical subjects, and their modes of engagement are indicative of an epistemological anxiety before the social aspects of discourse. By definition, studies of mass communication and other meaning production require researchers to take discursive positions in their analytical metadiscourse as well as in theoretical discourse. An interesting intervention in the debates has been made by Hartley (1988), who notes that one implicit aim of reception analysis is, and must be, to "*persuade* audiences to take up, unproblematically or otherwise, those positions that our critical analysis suggests are *better* than others" (p. 238).

Because the activity of reception has major implications for issues of power and cultural identity, a theory of mass media reception would have to explain how the discourses of audiences, as well as of analysts, might make a concrete difference in the social construction of reality.

To sum up, the argument of this essay will focus on the level of theoretical discourse, while assuming that any specific theoretical perspective must be checked and balanced against other levels of discourse. In particular, I suggest that the framework of pragmatism and semiotics, as originally outlined by Charles Sanders Peirce, can help to integrate the social and discursive aspects of reception analysis.¹ Semiotics may, in fact, be contrasted with Saussurean semiology, the applications of which to mass media and popular culture have often neglected or misconstrued the reception aspect because of a particular philosophical legacy. Building on the Peircean framework, I characterize reception as a socially situated, semiotic practice through reference to the concept of interpretive communities. Finally, I introduce findings from empirical reception analysis in order to reinterpret the notion of polysemy, with implications for the analysis of mass media as social institutions and for the political conclusions that may be drawn from work with mass media audiences.

WHERE IS MEANING?

A Cartesian Legacy

Like history, theory tends to repeat itself. Communication theory, in its quest for the foundations or origins of meaning, has reiterated the quest for some incorrigible foundation of knowledge that has preoccupied professional philosophy since Descartes (Rorty, 1979). Descartes, having hypostatized the distinction between the knowing subject and its objects in reality, committed philosophy to the project of reestablishing a symmetry between the subjective and objective realms as a foundation of human enterprise. Central to the Cartesian project was, of course, the definition of the subjective and objective poles of the universe. At the center of the modern mental universe emerged the solitary, but perspicacious, individual, just as in the areas of economic enterprise and political activity the individual presumably now reigned supreme (Lowe, 1982). The knowing subject was seen to have, potentially, the powers of introspection and self-awareness. Similarly, the objects of knowledge were seen to have positive existence. The crucial link between the realms—the correlate of external reality in human experience—was defined, following Locke, as the data of sense perception. Accordingly, eyesight entered philosophical discourse as the major metaphor for the activity of knowing. By pointing to sense data as objective correlates of individuals' subjective knowledge, early modern philosophy arrived at a spatial and essentialist conception of reality and was thus able to address the question, *Where is reality?*

By analogy, the first few decades of communication theory have addressed the question, Where is meaning? Whereas Cartesian philosophy searched for means of gaining access to and representing aspects of reality, communication theory seeks to identify the means by which one mind is able to represent its own understanding (representation) of reality in a form that is understandable or meaningful to another mind. The question of meaning, admittedly, has received a variety of answers (McQuail & Windahl, 1981), but a common feature of several classic theories is the transmission metaphor, assuming that meaning is an essence of message content that can be located in spatial terms. In Lasswell's (1948/1966) formulation of "Who/Says What/In Which Channel/To Whom/With What Effect?" (p. 178), the "what" of communication is conceived of as a message entity that maintains a rather simple presence in the world and links two minds with reference to a shared reality. Reception is said to involve a selection of certain building blocks of meaning, so that any communicant who "performs a relay function can be examined in relation to input and output" (p. 186).

Other classic communication theories approach the question – Where is meaning? – in a way that is reminiscent specifically of twentieth-century philosophy. As part of the general shift toward a philosophy based in the analysis of language (Hartnack, 1965; Wittgenstein, 1958), the procedures of knowing came to be seen as dependent upon formal and later natural languages, and philosophy may be said to have retreated to a position that observes reality from within language. Similarly, some communication theories focus their analysis on the manifest vehicles of meaning. The mathematical theory of communication (Shannon & Weaver, 1949), for one, suggests that meaning resides in the signal of communication. This theory attempts to dissolve the question by reducing meaning to information or stimuli. While recognizing the semantic and pragmatic aspects of communication, the vocabulary of the book defines also the recipients in technical terms when arguing that a general theory of communication "will surely have to take into account not only the capacity of the channel but also (even the words are right!) the capacity of the audience" (p. 27). Whether or not these are the right words is precisely the issue. By assigning meaning and information to distinct categories of reality and by assuming the hegemony of technical reality, the mathematical model begs the question and ultimately fails to consider the *reference* of communication to some social reality and its *reception* by interpretive agents.

A similar delimitation of meaning has been made within semiology, and it has provided the framework for much research on the reception of media discourses. From a semiological perspective, meaning may be said to reside in structures of discourse.

Discourses of Semiology

By distinguishing between the code of communication and the channel, or contact, Jakobson's (1960/1981) model makes the important point that meaning

production is dependent upon culturally specific forms of encoding and decoding. A transmission via cable radio of, say, a symbolist poem by Baudelaire activates numerous codes of linguistic and cultural form even though the vehicle may be a digital signal. However, while Jakobson refers to the addresser and addressee who communicate through a message with reference to a context, he proposes to stay within the bounds of the language code, examining linguistic structures that may underscore a particular element of the model and hence a particular function of communication, for example, an expression of emotion, a command, or a poetic use of language. Indeed, the elements of Jakobson's model have no status outside of language; reality and recipients are conceived of as linguistic traces. Jakobson wants to refrain from addressing "the question of relations between the word and the world" (p. 19).

While Saussure (1916/1959), like Jakobson, originally emphasized an immanent analysis of linguistic structures, some later semiological research, especially from a critical perspective, has developed the argument that the use of particular structures of media discourse may be a sufficient condition for an ideological impact, hence implying that the primary locus of ideology is in media discourses, rather than in their contextual uses by audiences (Jensen, 1988b). It may have been tempting to conclude further that ideological impact is due to a false or, at least, historically and situationally inadequate representation of reality in discourse that gives rise to false consciousness. In fact, the elementary sign, as defined by Saussure (1916/1959), consisting of signifier (sound-image) and signified (concept), recalls the subject-object, mind-matter dualism of the Cartesian legacy.² The importance attached to the structure of media discourse, moreover, grows out of the long hermeneutic tradition in the West of studying religious and other canonical works. Thus, whereas a great deal of credit is due to semiological work within anthropology, literary criticism, and cultural studies (Culler, 1975; Eagleton, 1983; Fiske & Hartley, 1978) for initiating and legitimating a systematic study of popular culture, the theoretical framework has focused attention on media discourses as meaning *products*, and has not been able to accommodate the analysis of meaning production as *process* or social practice. By reformulating the question of meaning in temporal and relational terms, semiotics offers a contrast and an alternative to semiology.

WHEN IS MEANING?

Applying a pragmatist mode of analysis to the arts, Goodman (1978) has argued that "What is art?" is the wrong kind of question, and should be restated as "When is art?" (p. 57). No object is permanently or inherently a work of art: In a specific context an object may be assigned the function of whatever the word *art* implies. Meaning, by analogy, is not an essential feature of discourse, but is a quality assigned to discourse by interpretive agents. This line of argument may be substan-

tiated with reference to Peirce's conceptualization of signs, interpretants, and interpretive communities.

Signs

In contrast to the Saussurean dualism of signifier and signified, Peirce (1931-1958) proposes a basic configuration of three elements—sign, object, and interpretant:

A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. (vol. 2, p. 228)

While my argument focuses on the interpretation of discursive meaning, to Peirce all cognition and indeed all perception is thus mediated by signs: Through the senses, we do not have access to any brute reality of facts. Peirce's objects include physical things, ideas, and acts, as well as discourses, and may be thought of as grammatical objects. Interpretants, in their turn, are signs by which people may orient themselves toward and interact with a reality of diverse objects, events, and discourses. Significantly, the interpretant is neither identical with the interpretive agent nor an essence representing the content of that person's thoughts. Positing that "every thought must be interpreted in another, or that all thought is in signs," Peirce (1958, p. 34) suggests that interpretation is a continuous process, rather than one act that, once and for all, internalizes external phenomena through a medium of signs.

This is not to imply that the interpretive agent is forever separated from social or material reality. Nothing, in fact, could be further from Peirce's argument than the nominalist position that we can know "only" signs; Peirce consistently defines himself as a realist.³ To Peirce, then, signs are not *what* we know, but *how* we come to know what we can justify saying we know. Signs constitute a primary human mode of interacting with reality.

Specifically regarding the interpretation of discursive meaning, this suggests shifting the analytical emphasis from the structures of discourse to the processes of interpretation and their bases in social contexts. While the sign remains the central explanatory concept, meaning comes to be defined in *relational* rather than essential terms: The meaning of signs is determined not by their inherent characteristics, but by their position within the system of meaning production as a whole. Saussure (1916/1959), to be sure, advanced a similar argument, namely that, within the language system, "units are not positive entities but the nodes of a series of differences" (Culler, 1975, p. 11). However, by emphasizing the relations of difference *within* the language system and leaving aside the uses of language in social practices, the semiological paradigm has become preoccupied with the

potential, immanent meaning of discursive relations. In contrast, semiotics offers a framework for studying meaning production with reference to those concrete discursive relations that are actualized by socially situated interpretive agents. How the interpretive strategies of specific audience-publics address and assimilate particular media and genres would seem to be a central question for any “science that studies the life of signs within society” (Saussure, 1916/1959, p. 16).

Interpretants

The continuous and practice-oriented aspects of interpretation may be specified through reference to Peirce’s notion of the interpretant. Whereas interpretants can be characterized as signs constituting the steps of a continuous interpretive process, Peirce (1958) distinguishes three levels or kinds of interpretants. First, his Immediate Interpretant is “the total unanalyzed effect that the Sign is calculated to produce, or naturally might be expected to produce” (p. 413). In the context of mass communication, this level may be said to refer to the potential meaning of media content. The fact that media discourses have proven to be relatively open structures that can accommodate a variety of messages may be explained, in part, by the status of media discourses as complex relations of difference. While it may be possible to determine the potential or *structural* meaning of these relations of difference for purposes of a textual or historical analysis, it is important to keep in mind that such meaning is the construct of an interpretive act with particular theoretical assumptions. Meaning always involves an interpretive stance, whether of a researcher or another interpretive agent.

Peirce’s second level of interpretation is the Dynamical Interpretant, which “consists in direct effect actually produced by a Sign upon an Interpreter of it” (p. 413). Again, this may be said to refer to the actualized meaning that audiences arrive at as they interact with mass media in the immediate context of media use, thus establishing specific relations of difference between structures of media content and available strategies of interpretation. Thus interpretive agents literally make a difference in the process of meaning production, and the process of interpretation results in the production of *situated* meaning. Interpretation is not oriented primarily toward media discourses, but toward the setting in which media discourses attain relevance. It should perhaps be added that the “effect” referred to by Peirce is not primarily behavioral. While some later research has appropriated Peircean concepts in a behaviorist version of semiotics (Morris, 1971), it is in keeping with Peirce’s own mode of analysis to think of meaning effects as dispositions, or discursive differences, that may be actualized as action or consciousness.

Third, what Peirce calls the Final Interpretant is “the effect the Sign *would* produce upon any mind upon which circumstances should permit it to work out its full effects” (p. 413). Whereas Peirce appears to subscribe to a notion of Truth — the Sign to end all signs — one interesting implication of this third level of interpretation is that the interpretive process unfolds over time, so that, for instance, media

discourses may be reactivated outside the immediate context of media use. As a result, interpretations of media content, to some degree, orient the consciousness and action of audience-publics. For want of a better term, we may label this interpretive dimension of everyday experience as *performative* meaning; it is the result of specific relations of difference being worked out between media discourses and the diverse discourses through which people position themselves in contexts of social life. Because performative meaning represents a discursive difference that, if enacted, may have a concrete effect on individual as well as social action, it is of special interest for assessing the political implications of reception.

The idea that interpretation may constitute an enactment of specific discursive differences in social practice has been developed by other research: Meaning is a difference that makes a difference (Bateson, 1972, p. 242; Goodman, 1976, p. 227). It was W. I. Thomas who stated the principle that the social construction of reality has practical consequences: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (quoted in Rochberg-Halton, 1986, p. 44). Accordingly, information about and perspectives on political and everyday reality that are assimilated from mass media help to shape and are in turn shaped by current social practices. The concrete difference made by mass media reception in social life depends, further, on the discursive and institutional structures within which interpretation is situated. Interpretation, in many respects, is the accomplishment not of individuals, but of collectives or communities.

Communities

Rejecting the Cartesian, individual subject as a foundation of knowledge, Peirce instead introduces communities of knowers as the only possible public sanction of knowledge. While he does not credit individuals with any power of introspection or immediate self-awareness, Peirce (1958) suggests that the sense of self might be the indirect and cumulative result of numerous other cognitions whose consistency suggests a subjective center, what is referred to as a "man-sign" (p. 71). However, any discursive position remains open to challenge and revision as part of an ongoing interpretive social process. Consequently, Peirce argues, true knowledge must be arrived at by some public procedure:

Unless truth be recognized as *public*—as that of which *any* person would come to be convinced if he carried his inquiry, his sincere search for immovable belief, far enough—then there will be nothing to prevent each one of us from adopting an utterly futile belief of his own which all the rest will disbelieve. (p. 398)

In the areas of logic and science, at least, the communities of inquiry must subject themselves to certain public procedures of interpretation that determine what will count as true knowledge. Being public, moreover, the interpretive procedures are subject to constant reformulation. Hence scientific communities

perform the socially central function of developing interpretive principles for examining particular aspects of reality, sometimes with major social implications (Kuhn, 1970; Lowe, 1982). Even if scientific communities have no essential attributes in the form of special insight, authority, or power, they nevertheless may make a difference also beyond scientific practice by asserting and legitimating particular procedures and practices of knowing, or performative meanings.

Two points may serve to specify the explanatory value of the concept of interpretive communities in relation to mass media reception. First, the *macrosocial* functions of mass media are comparable, in some respects, to those of science as characterized by Peirce. Both institutions serve to place reality on a public agenda, and they operate through practices that presuppose some degree of consensus regarding interpretive procedures. Furthermore, whereas the specific organizational hierarchies admittedly differ, as do access to and participation in the interpretive communities of science and mass communication, respectively, both communities are increasingly important agents for maintaining the political, cultural, and material structures of society. In Peirce's terminology, science is a context for negotiating the Final Interpretant of knowledge. Mass communication, similarly, may provide a forum for negotiating particularly those performative meanings that are contested, because meanings might be enacted through some form of concerted, socially sanctioned action.

Second, the Peircean framework suggests the constitutive role of discursive, or *microsocial*, acts of interpretation in communicative practices at the macrosocial level of organization. In other words, the reproduction of many forms of social life depends not just on the availability of specific institutions of communication, but also on the existence of interpretive communities that crisscross other social formations as they serve to orient the process of meaning production toward particular contexts and purposes. Interpretive communities thus may be a strategic juncture between micro- and macrosocial levels of analysis.

What distinguish interpretive communities of mass media reception from Peirce's scientific communities are, perhaps, diversity and complexity. While communities in the scientific world are relatively delimited, both professionally and institutionally, Peirce also implies that their interpretive procedures, ideally, would be homogeneous and, if not simple, at least explicit and conscious, progressing toward clarity and consensus. In contrast, there are multiple approaches to interpreting and using mass communication that, further, grow out of and bear witness to a complex and conflictual social reality. Mass media reception, being codetermined by and integrated with other social practices, thus may be analyzed as a socially situated, semiotic practice.

RECEPTION AS SOCIAL PRACTICE

Despite some previous research stressing the interrelatedness of media with other social practices (Ball-Rokeach, 1985), few studies, from either critical or

mainstream perspectives, have given much attention to the contexts and purposes of media use, compared to the texts and production strategies of media as such (Anderson & Meyer, 1988). Yet, for most people most of the time, mass communication could hardly be the factor overdetermining their orientations and actions. Instead, a complex set of social practices with political, economic, and cultural purposes generally circumscribes the reception of mass communication. Whereas some earlier studies have suggested ways of combining a discursive with a social perspective of communication (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Rochberg-Halton, 1986; Volosinov, 1973), social semiotics is still in the making.

Interpretive Communities

The concept of interpretive communities may help to reestablish the links between reception analysis and the analysis of mass media as social *institutions*. If the generalized social function of mass media is the production and circulation of meaning in society, then, evidently, a variety of social factors set the general conditions of reception. As noted by Schudson (1987), the recent interest in reception implies a certain sentimentality in academia concerning the empowered role of individuals in mass communication processes that may deflect attention from structural issues regarding the distribution of cultural resources in society. It would seem to be an overstatement, for example, that mass media recipients performing oppositional decodings engage in “semiotic ‘guerilla warfare’” (Eco, 1976, p. 150). Interpretive communities, instead, can be seen as forms of cultural agency to which individuals are socialized and that generate discursive strategies for making sense of the institutions with which individuals interact on a regular basis.

Whereas the concept of interpretive communities originates in recent literary theory, particularly the work of Fish (1979), most research in the literary tradition has not addressed the concrete social uses of literature and rarely has examined readers in any empirical sense (Holub, 1984; Suleiman & Crosman, 1980; Tompkins, 1980). Recently, however, the term has been used in communication research (Jensen, 1987; Lindlof, 1988) as a means of linking hermeneutic and social scientific modes of analyzing meaning production. Media audience groups may be defined not just by their formal social roles, but, more important, by the strategies of understanding by which they engage mass media content and other cultural forms. Three general features seem to characterize such interpretive communities: They are multiple, overlapping, and potentially contradictory.

First, different audience groups may apply *multiple* interpretive strategies to the same media discourse and still make sense of it. An obvious example would be the studies of the reception of *Dallas* in different cultures (Katz & Liebes, 1984), which imply that the series can be assimilated by various modes of interpretation to make a statement on family or social issues in many cultural settings. More important, perhaps, the same recipient may draw on multiple interpretive strategies, depending on the purpose or context of reception. A radio listener may act as

member of a subculture (Hebdige, 1979) when listening to certain programs (for example, music) while, perhaps, merging with a more general audience for other programs (for example, news). Second, then, interpretive communities should also be seen as *overlapping* each other in that a group of recipients may share some but not all interpretive strategies with other groups. Even within what might be taken as one subculture, for example, the punk culture of San Francisco, Lull (1987) suggests that there are subtle but significant distinctions between the outlooks of self-defined skinheads and those of punks.

Third, and perhaps most important, interpretive strategies that are employed by the same individual or group may be mutually inconsistent, or *contradictory*, because they derive from different contexts or represent the orientations of different social formations that may be in conflict. While this last point is elaborated below, it begins to identify the conflictual aspect of much interpretation that works out specific perspectives on social reality.

Without aiming for a typology at this stage, the sections below examine some of the social forces structuring interpretive strategies. Three types of factors may be thought of as conditions of existence for interpretive communities: discourses and genres, practices, and social institutions.

Discourses and Genres

It is important, first of all, to recognize the discursive organization of everyday experience. For one thing, it appears evident that the mastering not just of a language code, but of particular forms of communicative interaction and interpretation, is a prerequisite of social competence. For another thing, it is normally agreed that twentieth-century mass media, especially television (National Institute of Mental Health, 1982), have contributed to a new kind of totalized media environment that envelops media recipients in an unprecedented fashion, dissolving previously separate categories and levels of reality (Meyrowitz, 1985). Ratings and readership figures, at any rate, suggest that the mass media provide an intense and continuous training in skills for decoding communication. Similarly, the narrative conventions of music videos (Kinder, 1984) imply a perceptual readiness on the part of a young generation of viewers that may be the cumulative result of being socialized to particular visual discourses.

Genres, more specifically, invite recipients to take particular stances with implied social roles (Williams, 1977), thus contributing to the building of specific interpretive communities. The classic examples in communication history are the novel (Watt, 1957) and the mass press (Habermas, 1962; Schudson, 1978), which bear witness to the rise of new cultural and political publics. What needs to be emphasized, perhaps, is the efficacy of socioeconomic forces in the process of change. As Hall (1980a) notes, there is a tendency in some discourse theory to assume that discursive structures stake out a narrow range of positions and practices for recipients, leaving little scope for the activity of historical, social subjects, and providing little explanation of how social practices change. Presum-

ably, in a contemporary perspective as well, it is reformers and revolutionaries who create pamphlets, not vice versa.

One example of interpretive communities constituting themselves around specific genres might be fan groups for music and even for individual texts, such as the cult following of movies like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. At one level, these groups are comparable to religious congregations centered in holy scriptures. In both cases, of course, the texts may be seen as means of orienting the religious or cultural practices of the group.

Finally, and more generally, much education might be thought of as the social creation of certain canonical strategies of interpretation that, further, are often centered in a particular body of texts. This is not to deny the general relevance of critical interpretive skills, but to raise the question of which social purposes are served by a specific interpretive canon. The social purposes of interpretive strategies may be assessed with reference to practices.

Practices

The concept of practice serves to emphasize the processual aspect of much social interaction. As Hall (1980b) suggests, a great deal of work in cultural studies integrates *structuralist* assumptions, seeing society as a structured totality of interrelated sectors, with *culturalist* assumptions, pointing to the indeterminacies of the social structure and underlining the role of human consciousness and cultural forms generally in the reproduction of social life. Whereas the social roles of individuals are, to a great extent, predefined by structural factors, these roles nevertheless may be negotiated and reconstructed as part of the ongoing activities of either work or leisure. Building on Peirce (1958, p. 71), one could say that social practices create a *wo/mansign*, or a sense of identity. Practices may be defined as socially meaningful activities. One example of how meaning production applies to material, economic activities is advertising, which, while serving fundamental purposes of exchange and distribution, simultaneously invites recipients to take particular discursive positions in relation to a particular economic system. Advertising may be “capitalism’s way of saying ‘I love you’ to itself” (Schudson, 1984, p. 232).

Mass media, then, provide occasions for negotiating the practice-related roles in which people find themselves, and practices, in turn, constitute a framework that may orient not just specific interpretations, but also routines of media use. This comes out, for example, in media habits that are differentiated by gender. Morley’s (1986) study of television viewing in British families of a specific socioeconomic group suggests that, at least in this microcosm, the male head of the household has special privileges for choosing which programs the family will watch together because he spends most of the day at work outside the home, which is defined for him as a locus of leisure. In cases where the male is unemployed and the female employed, however, the pattern may be reversed. For female heads of households, the home may not be so clearly defined as a sphere of leisure because they are more

likely also to take care of household work there, frequently in addition to employment outside the home. Television viewing in the home context thus may be defined for women as a "guilty pleasure." Radway (1984) found a similar pattern in relation to women's romance reading, which may be a means of claiming time for oneself, and might be construed as a "declaration of independence." In general, then, media may become *resources* for coping with particular realities of everyday practices.

In other respects, the family is an important site of practices that have a bearing on media use. Lull (1980) suggests that television schedules are used, for example, to establish firm bedtimes, and the portrayal of daily family life, for instance in fictional television series, may be used as a source of arguments in disputes about family matters. Moreover, this points to a specific socializing impact of television as it portrays families to family audiences across a variety of genres. By offering, for private consumption, public images of private lives, television may redraw the boundaries between private and public spheres (Meyrowitz, 1985). The family is one of the social institutions serving as a point of reference for the interpretation and use of mass communication.

Institutions

The perceived relevance of mass communication may be explained, in part, by the reference of media content to major social institutions that are subject to negotiation in contemporary society. Mass communication highlights aspects of political, cultural, and economic institutions with which the members of the audience-public interact on a regular basis, thus providing a context for the interpretation of everyday reality. The institutions can be said, generally, to lend orientation to the activity of interpretation; they are thus another condition of existence for interpretive communities.

Though mass communication addresses a wide variety of social institutions, certain genres tend to thematize particular institutions. For example, programs using the format of a law court serve to thematize the judicial system. Similarly, television soap operas and situation comedies construct different perspectives on family life and the private sphere in general. And certain talk shows on American television can be said to trace the border between private and public areas by offering public perspectives on private issues, or vice versa.

Perhaps the most obvious nexus is that between the news genre and the institutions of political democracy. The news genre constitutes a resource for political participation and action, at least in principle. In order to explore the interrelations among institutions, discursive forms, and political agents, I propose to examine briefly the reception of news and the role of interpretive communities in political processes. Drawing on qualitative empirical research about American television news (Jensen, in press), I discuss the explanatory value of the present theoretical discourse for the audience discourses of a concrete study. Specifically, I suggest that one may detect several contradictory constructions of political institutions that

emerge as ambiguity, or polysemy, in audience discourses. Whereas some previous research has employed the concept of polysemy to explain the finding that audiences can derive different meanings from the same *media* discourses, polysemy may also be a feature of *audience* discourses that serves to question the legitimacy of a particular political order.

POLYSEMY: THE CASE OF NEWS

Polysemy of Media Discourses

The most detailed account of polysemy has been offered by Fiske (1986, 1987), who argues that polysemy is the source not only of the popularity and pleasure of watching television, but of a progressive political potential in television as well. While emphasizing the active role of television audiences, Fiske focuses attention on the discursive structures of media that may explain the variability of actual interpretations. Television discourses, he suggests, must be polysemic in order to be popular with a heterogeneous mass audience, and he supports his point with some insightful readings of television programs. In addition, whereas the pleasure of reception may function either as a “motor of hegemony” or as an essential component of “the ability to shake oneself free from its constraints” (Fiske, 1987, p. 234), “its typical one is the playful pleasure that derives from, and enacts, that source of all power for the subordinate, the power to be different” (p. 236). Thus his conclusion is that television discourses are not only potentially, but tendentially, progressive in political terms because they provide audiences with the means to resist the dominant social order.

The argument is not persuasive, however, primarily because resistance is not related specifically to those other social practices and institutions through which the dominant order is enforced. Instead, resistance is referred to in the abstract or defined in discursive terms. Resistance, in order to be a manifestation of power in any socially relevant sense, must be seen to make a difference beyond that immediate context of media use and those individual decodings that are most often invoked by Fiske. Even if a thousand oppositional decodings of media discourses are performed in a thousand homes employing a common interpretive strategy, that does not add up to resistance.

Fiske (1987) is careful to qualify his argument at various points lest he be thought to overestimate what might be called a “pseudo-power” (p. 318). Still, while it is certainly true that “social or collective resistance cannot exist independently of ‘interior’ resistance, even if that is given the devalued name of ‘fantasy’ ” (p. 318), this makes fantasy a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of social change. When Fiske deduces the further point that “paradoxically, diversity of readings may best be stimulated by a greater homogeneity of programming” (p. 319), he implies a defense of whatever programming proves economically most profitable, thus entrusting cultural policy to market forces. Whereas there may be

no populist intention behind the argument, the analysis tends to lose sight of the forest of political implications amid all the polysemic trees. There is, in fact, no evidence from actual comparative studies of more or less “homogeneous” types of programming to support Fiske’s conclusion, because most recent studies have not been comparative and have most often focused on programs that have been popular in market terms.

Finally, it is somewhat surprising to find, a few pages later, the suggestion that a very different argument applies to reception in the context of developing nations:

A lot more work needs to be done on the international reception of both news and entertainment programs and ways that the developed nations can help the less developed to produce their own cultural commodities that can genuinely challenge Hollywood’s in the arena of popular taste rather than of political or economic policy. (p. 323)

While more international research certainly is needed, and while the tribute to cultural specificity elsewhere is a nice gesture, it is not clear why the argument from polysemy would not apply here, or why the subcultures of the so-called developed nations do not need “their own cultural commodities” but are well served by those of Hollywood. Ultimately, though popular cultural forms may offer resources for resistance, in part because of their polysemic structure, the implications of polysemy need to be assessed by social standards. Resistance is always resistance to something, for a purpose, and in a context.

Polysemy of Audience Discourses

The context of the empirical study of television news reception was the United States; the aim was to examine how viewers conceive of the relevance of the information. Television has emerged, over the last three decades, as a major source of political information for Americans. Even if television may not be the main source of news in terms of information recalled (Robinson & Levy, 1986), it is perceived in opinion polls as the most credible and comprehensive source (Roper, Inc., 1985), and television, moreover, may have become a cultural common denominator, or forum (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1984), where major social issues are negotiated. Accordingly, television newscasts were used as points of departure for in-depth interviews about the political use value of the news genre. On the one hand, news may be seen as an *account* that covers political events and issues so that the audience may keep up as citizens and voters. News thus functions as an agent of representative democracy, legitimating and documenting that this political system really works. On the other hand, news may be seen as a *resource* in a more participatory form of democracy. Ideally, political communication might become the starting point of political intervention. In this model, news and political democracy are constitutive elements of the same social practice, and it is a familiar notion from the political revolutions of the Western world that today survives in the rhetoric of political discourse. If polysemy is located in such audience concep-

tions of political institutions, rather than in media discursive structures, this may call into question the legitimacy of the encompassing political system.

It generally has been assumed by critical (Holzer, 1973) as well as mainstream (Blumler, 1979) researchers that media content may have at least three different types of relevance. First, media may be a means of surveillance and a source of specific information about the social context, suggesting, if not action, at least a readiness for action. News, of course, may be the basis of opinion formation as well as political activity in some form. Second, media content may provide a sense of identity or self-legitimation, of belonging to a community, a subculture, or, perhaps, a political order. Third, media are a source of entertainment or diversion, offering relief for anxiety and escape from boredom. While referring to particular stories as well as stylistic features of various news formats, the interviews thus focused on issues relating to these three experiential dimensions, including the instrumental uses of news in an everyday context or in political life, the credibility of the information, and the aesthetic qualities particularly of the visual discourse.

Without entering into details of the methodology (Jensen, in press), it may be noted that a total of 12 news programs, representing network news as well as the programs of a local commercial station and a local public television station, and 24 interviews were recorded in an urban area of the northeastern United States. After a particular program was recorded on the night it aired, it was shown the following day, individually, to two respondents, who were subsequently interviewed individually. The days were selected randomly; the respondents were men drawn from the directory of a local university, representing a range of educational and occupational backgrounds.

A linguistic discourse analysis of the verbatim transcripts served to identify particular structures in these audience discourses. Specifically, the linguistic structures point to the simultaneous presence of several different, perhaps contradictory, assumptions concerning the use value of news, which may be interpreted, with reference to the theoretical discourse of semiotics, as polysemy deriving from contradictions in the practices and institutions of politics. While it is interesting to note the relative homogeneity of audience discourses across the spectrum of respondents, implying that the contradictions are systemic, the main issue here is the three dimensions of the news experience.

The respondents attributed the relevance of news, first of all, to its factual information regarding political issues and events. Among their arguments for watching television news was a need to check information, both over time and with reference to several media. However, when discussing how to resolve actual conflicts between sources, the respondents implied that this was hardly a relevant concern in practice. Asked whether he would actually seek more evidence in case of conflicting information, one respondent said:

I would probably seek more evidence. You've got, it's kind of an interesting idea that, that two news, news sources, two, two medias who are in conflict in their reporting. It would be kind of interesting to see how, you know, how it works out, how it comes out.

The implication of his main point — that it is an interesting question — is that this is also an unfamiliar issue. In practice, it seems, this respondent is not likely to seek further evidence. A conflict is something that “works out” or “comes out,” rather than something that is actively resolved.

One explanation may be that news is not, after all, perceived as an instrument or resource in any concrete sense. Talking about the possible uses of news in politics, respondents expressed frustration as well as embarrassment. With reference to editorials in newscasts, for which contributions from the public are often solicited, a respondent suggested that it would be relevant for him to contribute, and yet, “it could be done, but I don’t do it [laughs].” Another respondent mentioned that as a young person he wanted to get into politics, “I guess deep in the back of my mind I still want it too, [but now] I guess the opportunity will have to arise. . . . I feel I’m just the average person out here.” In sum, there may be no precedent and no institution for such participatory uses of the information, even if this is the implicit promise of the news genre.

Legitimation, instead, emerges as a major use value of television news: News viewing provides a sense of belonging to a specific social and political order. Whereas the respondents appear to enact a legitimation of their own role in the political order, they may also, in doing so, attribute legitimacy to that order as it currently exists. In particular, two concepts — *control* and *distance* — lend structure to this aspect of the news experience. Even though viewers may have no control over political events, the news, particularly concerning local political matters, can give them a *sense* of control over events that would otherwise appear distant:

Sometimes on the local level it’s, if you can’t do anything about it, at least it’s more, it’s closer to you, you know, and, you know, you feel like you can do something more about it maybe when it comes to voting or to some other activity.

The concept of legitimacy does not imply that the respondents necessarily endorse the legitimacy of specific political positions. As shown by previous work on news decoding, there is relatively great scope for selective and oppositional interpretations of particular news *accounts* (Jensen, 1988a; Morley, 1980). Moreover, the respondents presented a variety of criticisms of news media, including reference to the “glittering generalities” of local television news. The point is that while television news is a convenient mechanism, in the context of everyday life, for keeping up with political information, it does not acquire the status of a *resource* in political practice.

The third use value — diversion or entertainment — presents itself as a specific, integrated aspect of news reception. In particular, the performance of the anchorpeople and the extensive use of video coverage contribute to a dimension of “sparkle” in the news discourse. Whereas, for example, gratifications research tends to assume that entertainment might be as prominent an aspect of the news experience as any other (McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972), these respondents suggest rather that it is an integrated dimension that, while important, is subordi-

nated to other use values. Television news is, indeed, recognized as a political genre. Thus, while a number of narrative conventions and interpretive strategies associated with genres of entertainment may enter into news viewing, they can be said to constitute a subdiscourse of news reception. One respondent suggested the complexity of what may be expected from television news when he described his ideal news program: "It would be more in the direction of something like MacNeil/Lehrer but with more pizzazz to it, with more visuals."

In conclusion, while television news provides a daily forum for the viewers' reassertion of their political competence, it is not conceived of as a resource to be applied in the organizations and institutions of political life, even though the respondents argued that this is, in principle, possible and relevant. The contradictory aspects of news reception may bear witness to a divided form of everyday consciousness that derives from contradictions at the macrosocial level of social institutions, where the social uses of news are not institutionalized and do not have any precedent in political practice. It may, then, be a contradictory *social* definition of news that manifests itself at the level of audience discourses as polysemy. News audiences remain interpretive communities, rather than becoming communities of political practice.

Like the news genre, a variety of fictional genres also address issues of power relating to social institutions. In the perspective of pragmatism, mass media may be seen generally as institutions-to-think-with about other institutions.

POLITICS OF PRAGMATISM

Institutions-to-Think-With

While anthropologists sometimes speak of objects-to-think-with (Schudson, 1987, p. 56), mass media can be thought of as industrialized institutions-to-think-with. Even if the media environment of the late twentieth century may be, in certain respects, blurring the boundary between everyday reality and mass-mediated reality, media institutions still serve to bracket reality and place it on a public agenda. Traditionally, this function has been associated with the press and other news media that have been labeled the Fourth Estate (Cater, 1959; Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956). The assumption, again, is that the press may serve as a vehicle of political information and debate, keeping voters informed and ready to act, while holding politicians accountable.

Recently, this aspect of mass communication has been reconceptualized as a *cultural forum* (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1984) that extends its area of application beyond narrowly political processes. The argument is that mass media that are consumed by practically the entire public in a culture (e.g., American television) make up a special social site or forum. In particular, Newcomb and Hirsch (1984) imply that the cultural forum may be rather indeterminate in its effects and quite liberal in the range of perspectives it may accommodate, since "the raising of

questions is as important as the answering of them” (p. 63). Drawing on the anthropological framework of Victor Turner, the authors suggest that television programming constructs a *liminal* or in-between realm whose functions in American culture may be comparable to those of ritual. Whereas much television fare might be seen as escapist, it also allows for a culture to trace its beliefs and test its boundaries as well as for individuals to explore alternative identities and realities. Thus the social role of television may not be one of presenting ready-made ideological conclusions; rather, it “*comments on* ideological problems” (p. 64). Initiating a negotiation of social reality, then, television may invite audience participation by leaving a significant scope for interpretation and reconstruction.

The cultural forum model is sometimes combined with the concept of polysemy to suggest similar political implications: Audiences are powerful, and television programs are valuable resources for the reconstruction of social reality. Recognizing that they may seem to overstate the critical potential of television, Newcomb and Hirsch (1984) do note that the cultural forum “is an effective pluralistic forum only insofar as American political pluralism is or can be” (p. 64). In other words, American political pluralism may not be pluralistic in any meaningful sense of that term. Yet, the authors also ascribe to television a capacity “to monitor the limits and effectiveness of this pluralism” (p. 64), implying that television can indeed perform its role of political and cultural watchdog, on which much of the faith in pluralism rests. Among the references to attempts at criticism and reform that have been initiated by television is mentioned the emergence of diverse special interest groups (presumably ranging from, for example, Action for Children’s Television to the Moral Majority) that may support their case regarding particular social issues with reference to their (mis)representation on television. By identifying “‘fault lines’ in American society” (p. 69), television could be said to empower its audience-publics.

The main limitation of the analysis is that it represents a perspective from only one type of social institution, namely, mass media. What is not considered are the relations of feedback between the mass media and other institutions, in the present case TV news media and political institutions. Unlike geological faults, social fault lines, once identified, might be acted upon. Which sectors of society, first of all, are likely never to be subject to any television representation and hence to any form of negotiation? What impact, if any, could the cultural forum be said to have had on a particular institution in a specific respect? Which factors will explain why certain social groups have little or no access to the cultural forum? And which factors will explain the existence of knowledge gaps among participants in the cultural forum? In essence, while the cultural forum model takes an important step beyond some previous simplified conceptions of effects, it stops short of a model that might account for the specific social and cultural differences made by mass media, and by their recipients, including the difference that consists of maintaining the status quo. Some elements of such a model may be found in the tradition of pragmatism following Peirce.

Elements of Pragmatism

While I could not hope to cover in any detail here the development of pragmatism (Ogden & Richards, 1923/1946; Rorty, 1966; White, 1973), it is interesting to note the social implications of Peirce's thinking as developed by some later work in a pragmatic mode (Bernstein, 1986). The epochal shift from a philosophy of the human subject to a philosophy of language that was, in certain respects, signaled by Peirce may be taken as one condition for the development of a new conception of truth that is linked to communication and practice. First, then, Peirce's characterization of knowledge as processual and mediated by signs begins to reevaluate the acts of communication and interpretation that construct knowledge. Second, despite his ambiguity concerning the historicity of knowledge, Peirce implies, through reference to interpretive communities, that the validation of knowledge must be accomplished in public. Knowledge and truth thus might be seen as historical constructions, representing a consensus that is socially validated and has practical consequences. Accordingly, knowledge that derives from media use is the outcome of historically situated interpretive strategies that interact with contemporary social practices. The third implication of pragmatism, which may be emphasized especially by current work, is that the institutions of knowledge and communication are crucial in any process of social change. Pragmatism may also inform a critical theory of communication and society.

While Peirce appears to insist on the purity of science, arguing against a notion of applied research (Skagestad, 1981, p. 199), other early proponents of pragmatism, particularly John Dewey, have pointed to the practical, social implications of knowledge. In contrast to earlier forms of philosophy, Dewey suggests, pragmatism implies a specific orientation toward the future, toward difference and action:

Whereas, for empiricism, in a world already constructed and determined, reason or general thought has no other meaning than that of summing up particular cases, in a world where the future is not a mere word, where theories, general notions, rational ideas have consequences for action, reason necessarily has a constructive function. (Rorty, 1966, p. 210)

In other words, principles of social and political action are related to and, perhaps, deducible from a particular form of rationality. Dewey himself, however, remained vague in his analyses, for example, of how to increase public participation in political life (Dewey, 1927). In his attempts to deconstruct the contemporary philosophical tradition, Dewey tended to stay within the form of abstract conceptual analysis that characterized that tradition (Rorty, 1982, p. 35).

"Pragmatism survived as a philosophical position from the time of John Dewey to the late 1970s, but it did not flourish" (Prado, 1987, p. 1). In European thought, it might be added, even though ideas concerning the social construction of subjectivity, which are similar especially to those of Mead (1934), run through much Continental sociology, psychology, and semiotics, the relevance of pragmatism

rarely has been explored. Recently, however, the discourse of pragmatism has reasserted itself on both sides of the Atlantic in a form that often seeks to combine a philosophy of language with a critical theory of society (Bernstein, 1986; Goodman, 1976; Goodman & Elgin, 1988; Habermas, 1981, 1984; Rorty, 1979, 1982, 1989). Working out a theory of communication that addresses the historical origins and social uses of meaning may, indeed, be a common agenda for writers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas, and Richard Rorty (Bernstein, 1986, p. 58).

Perhaps the most sustained attempt to develop a social theory of communication that integrates institutional and discursive levels of analysis is the work of Jürgen Habermas. A few of the main concepts of his theory of communicative action (Thompson, 1984) may suggest his articulation of pragmatism. Language, Habermas notes, is a distinctive feature of humans, and it is the use of language in various contexts that makes complex social structures possible. Linguistic intercourse, however, is not by nature a neutral means of coordinating social life: Language is also a source of power and control. It would be important, then, for a critical theory of society to determine the general conditions under which language may serve communicative ends of understanding, as opposed to strategic ends of domination.

In order to define what might be ideal conditions of communication generally, Habermas (1984) adopts the common strategy of twentieth-century philosophy of grounding himself in linguistic structures: A theory of communication must “start from the structure of linguistic expressions rather than from speakers’ intentions” (p. 275). His analytical strategy is one of deducing the ideal conditions of communication at the macrosocial level from the micro level of dialogue where individuals interact. Reformulating the speech-act theory of Austin (1962), Habermas distinguishes between two aspects of the communicative acts individuals perform, namely, “illocutionary acts (the act performed *in* saying something) and perlocutionary acts (the act performed *by* saying something)” (Thompson, 1984, p. 295). Whereas perlocution has some ulterior purpose, illocution essentially works to achieve intersubjective understanding. From this distinction at the level of interpersonal discourse, Habermas generalizes to other social modes of communication, and he suggests that illocution may be constitutive of a privileged, natural form of communication. With reference to this standard, then, it might be possible to evaluate the practices and institutions of communication in a given historical setting, since, in general,

the use of language with an orientation to reaching understanding is the *original mode* of language use, upon which indirect understanding, giving something to understand or letting something be understood, and the instrumental use of language in general, are parasitic. (Habermas, 1984, p. 288)

This dualism appears indicative of an essentialist ontology that dichotomizes the world into a secondary social structure and a primary level of reality constituting

natural forms of existence and interaction. The dichotomy recurs at the macrosocial level, where Habermas divides social reality into *system* (the dimension maintaining the material and institutional structures of society) and *lifeworld* (the dimension of collective and largely implicit premises of understanding that sustain everyday life). In Habermas's strategy, the primary level of the lifeworld is used to justify particular communicative procedures as the legitimate means of reaching a social consensus, even if communicative reason is defined in counterfactual terms, as an unrealized potential that might motivate changes in the prevailing social forms of communication. It is not clear, however, what purpose is served by hypostatizing dialogue as an ideal-type forum that exists outside of history. Changes in the *social* forms of communication, by definition, are enacted and legitimated in social and historical context. Indeed, the most controversial issues in a politics of communication have to do not with the abstract, inalienable rights of individuals to engage in social dialogue, but with the practices and institutions for *ending* dialogue, making decisions, and transforming decisions into action.

What Habermas develops, then, may be a last-ditch articulation of the question, Where is meaning? The implied answer is that meaning is inherent in certain natural conditions for the use of language: It is the original mode of language use that may make possible not only an incorrigible understanding of other individuals, but also the determination of certain fundamental principles of human community and social action. Even if neither the introspective subject nor the structure of language itself may be considered a reliable guide to the structure of social reality, it might be possible, according to Habermas, to deduce specific rules of interaction from human communication that would, then, constitute a forum where communicative reason might at last guide understanding and social action. How this production of meaning might be structured and legitimated in a particular social and historical context, however, remains an open question in Habermas' (1981, 1984) articulation of pragmatism. It is this question, finally, that a pragmatist theory of mass communication would have to address.

Toward a Pragmatist Theory of Mass Communication

The outline of such a theory may be specified with reference to three concepts: signs, purposes, and contexts. Meaning production may be defined in simple terms as the use of signs for a specific purpose in a particular context. Elsewhere, Habermas addresses several aspects of this definition. First, when examining the role of *signs* in social interaction, Habermas (1984) emphasizes the importance of a "*three-term model*" of sign use that goes back to Bühler and, from the very start, relates the analysis of linguistic meaning to the 'idea' of participants in communication coming to an understanding about something in the world" (p. 397). This formulation, while crediting another philosopher, recalls Peirce's configuration of sign, object, and interpretant, and it further suggests the orientation of most communication toward social practice. Peirce's general theory of signs might be a productive framework for the concrete analysis of communication and consciousness as developed by, among others, Habermas.⁴

Second, Habermas further has identified the constitutive role of *purposes* in social practices. With reference to different forms of science – human, natural, and social – Habermas (1971) suggests that their organization and procedures are characterized by particular purposes or *knowledge interests*. Whereas for the humanities the purpose of inquiry is contemplative understanding, and for the natural sciences predictive control, the purpose of the social sciences is defined as a liberating critique that can suggest alternatives to the forms of social organization that may appear inevitable when encountered in everyday life. Similarly, the knowledge interests of mass media are inscribed in their genres and institutional forms. A particular media content gives rise to particular applications by the recipients within the historical context of specific social institutions.

Third, then, the reception of mass communication takes place with reference to a *context* of social institutions, which, further, are premised on particular worldviews. Habermas (1962), in an early work, traces the historical development of the worldview associated with industrial capitalism, which assigns political, economic, and cultural aspects of reality to separate and relatively autonomous spheres: private versus public, the state versus individual economic enterprise, politics versus culture, and so on. The mass media may contribute to reproducing this worldview, in part, because it is implicit in the total configuration of media genres and institutional forms. Mass communication, in the aggregate, may serve to segregate or compartmentalize social reality in a specific form, thus fragmenting audiences' understanding of interrelations within the social structure. Addressing a particular range of issues, mass media are institutions-to-think-with for particular purposes that may have ideological implications.

Whereas it will take further theoretical work to explore the implications for the study of mass communication processes, pragmatism may offer a relevant framework for the field of communication research. By reformulating the question of meaning and developing the concept of difference, pragmatism begins to reconcile social and discursive aspects of communication. In particular, a social semiotics may produce models for relating a social-institutional level of analysis with analyses of the interpretive strategies of individual communicants. After a decade where much empirical attention has been given to the microsocial level of reception and to the discursive aspect of meaning production, it may be time to refocus on their interrelations with the macrosocial level of institutions and classes. What is at stake in mass communication, after all, is control over an important means of inquiry into social reality.

For a politics of communication, pragmatism may help to theorize the interrelations of mass media with other institutions of socialization, particularly educational institutions. Whereas one general aim of education is to acquaint students with the prevailing genres and institutions of meaning production, much less attention is paid to the *conditions* of meaning production, the social contexts and purposes of particular forms of culture and communication. One example is a favored assumption in much educational discourse about the so-called information society, namely, that communication technologies may make information avail-

able on an unprecedented scale, further implying numerous uses of the information in a variety of political and cultural practices. There is, however, little or no precedent for such uses of communications media, in part because this has not been considered a major purpose of formal education, which still emphasizes literacy and other basic instrumental skills as well as the acquisition of knowledge as such — meaning products that represent the cultural tradition as articulated by, for example, Bloom (1987). If, instead, schools were to emphasize looking for information with a purpose and the uses of information in social and cultural processes, they might help to reactivate interpretive strategies and social uses of mass communication.

To sum up, meaning may be when social agents interact through the use of signs for a specific purpose in a particular context, even if the difference made by signs may not be explicit or conscious; reflection, as practiced in schools and outside, may occur when the purpose of interaction is to specify the meaningfulness of the first level of signs in relation to their context. In discourse terms, reflection consists of establishing specific relations of difference between an analytical discourse and media discourse in order to assess the difference that media discourses may make in other social practices. In social terms, one aim of education, as it applies to the area of communication and culture, must be to bring about the condition of reflexivity in students, empowering them outside the educational forum to assess the knowledge interests of current forms of meaning production. Reflexivity need not imply an ideal-type forum of the Habermasian kind, involving a detached form of understanding, but rather might entail a socially situated analysis in a context and for a purpose. Whether such analyses may come to orient social action and change will depend, eventually, on the audience-publics who may enter into social institutions to enact a different system of mass communication.

CONCLUSION

Though the audience has been said to exist either nowhere, except as a discursive trace (Allor, 1988), or everywhere, in all of social reality (Lull, 1988a), this essay has argued that both perspectives are, in effect, correct, applying to different levels of analysis. Mass media audiences are both social and discursive phenomena. Whereas communication researchers gain access to media and recipients methodologically through discourses, and while the theoretical framework of analysis may be conceptualized as a discursive construct, this does not deny the existence of a social reality in which power, pleasure, pain, and injustice are important ingredients, and that might be changed for the better. Signs, following Peirce, are a primary human mode of interacting with reality, but that does not imply the Cartesian vision turned upside down, leaving subjects caught in a web of signs. Meaning is, indeed, constituted through a continuous process involving discursive relations of difference; it is also, however, enacted in social practices. One important role of mass media is the production and circulation of meaning in

society. Their audiences, representing a complex of interpretive communities, contribute to the negotiation of polysemy and the reconstruction of social reality as participants in what may be seen as a cultural forum. Being institutions-to-think-with for particular social purposes, mass media incorporate social contradictions that, in the long term, give rise to contradictory forms of reception. In sum, mass media recipients, while being relatively autonomous interpretive agents, enter into a specific historical configuration of practices and institutions that may be given a different form not by individual interpretations, but through social action.

Mass media reception, in many ways, is an integrated aspect of the everyday practices of communities and specific cultural groups, and should be studied in its social and discursive context. Qualitative methodologies, moreover, are especially relevant for conducting focused studies of strategic junctures in meaning production—for example, the audience perception of genres addressing major social institutions. While such focused studies may also be integrated with other forms of quantitative as well as qualitative evidence within a common theoretical framework, much research so far has been of a generally exploratory type. In methodological terms, moreover, reception studies still need to develop systematic procedures of analysis (Jensen, 1989). Interview statements by audiences are discursive documents that must be organized and analyzed with reference to a metadiscourse as well as theoretical and epistemological discourse, rather than being referred to for exemplification. Whereas “the best way to find out what the people think about something is to ask them” (Bower, 1973, p. vi), some reception studies have made premature conclusions about a new powerful audience, in part because systematic methodologies have been lacking in the area.

Two perspectives on reception processes—across cultures and across media—may have special explanatory value in further research. First, most studies to date have focused on Western Europe and North America (but see Lull, 1988b), normally without an explicitly comparative approach. While research on other regions is overdue, specific comparative studies may suggest the bearing of a particular cultural configuration on forms of reception and media use. Further, communication technologies such as satellite television that introduce new forms of programming across cultural boundaries are likely to give rise to specific forms of negotiation and accommodation on the part of audiences as well as national media institutions. Such developments should be studied in order to assess the relative power of cultural agencies at different levels of the international political and social structure.

Second, whereas television has been especially popular as an object of reception analysis in the 1980s, radio and various print media remain important ingredients of the media environment as a whole. Even more important, perhaps, media environments in different cultural settings increasingly constitute interrelated structures, not just from economic and institutional angles, but from the audience angle. The intertextuality of much mass communication—the references of one medium or genre to others—implies that similar meanings may be generated in the interaction between audiences and media that are in principle distinct, thus rein-

forcing whatever impact individual media could be said to have. While there are major theoretical and methodological problems connected with the analysis of total media environments, examining the reception and use of mass communication across several media will be an important task for the next decade of reception analysis. Though the medium may not be the message (McLuhan, 1964), an important aspect of the message is produced in the interaction between recipients and a specific configuration of media.

The social relevance of reception analysis depends, in part, on the difference it may make in relation to mass media audiences and institutions. One general implication of pragmatism for research is a challenge to make the production of knowledge public: The process of reflexivity, in certain respects, may become social and institutional. In addition to considering its forms of presentation and its own discourses (Van Maanen, 1988), communication scholars are obliged to reflect on the knowledge interests of researchers as they interact with audiences and programmers (Lindlof & Anderson, 1988). Being social agents, respondents need not shut up when the tape recorder is shut off. What I am saying, with Peirce, is, "Do not block the way of inquiry!" (Skagestad, 1981, p. 5).

NOTES

1. For an introduction to Peirce, see, for example, Skagestad (1981) and Hookway (1985). Despite an enormous body of work, which he produced under difficult circumstances and for the most part outside of any academic institution, Peirce never completed the system of logic and sciences that he envisioned. As part of an extensive correspondence between Lady Viola Welby and Peirce toward the end of his life, which may be read as the testament of an isolated and agonized scholar, he mentions that he was then "working desperately to get written before I die a book on Logic that shall attract some good minds through whom I may do some real good" (Peirce, 1958, p. 408). While the *Collected Papers* (Peirce, 1931-1958) represents the first attempt to edit his work, a chronological edition currently is being issued by Indiana University Press; the majority of the planned volumes are still in press. *Values in a Universe of Change* (Peirce, 1958) is a useful collection of central texts.

2. Assessing the ideological efficacy of signs, some analysts have suggested that particular textual structures tend to naturalize particular worldviews—signifieds—for the recipients of communication (Barthes, 1957/1973). Moreover, when considering ways of countering ideological impact, poststructuralists and deconstructionists in particular have repudiated the emphasis on the signified, pointed to the signifier as a shaper of alternative worldviews, and defined the signifier as a material force in a process of mental as well as social change. Referring to avant-garde forms of high cultural arts, Coward and Ellis (1977) suggest that audience-publics may be able to see themselves and their social contexts in a new light through the ruptures of such poetic language, since there is a "correspondence of the signifying practices of these texts and revolutionary practice" (p. 150). Whereas classic semiology may be the dream of Cartesianism, and deconstructionism its nightmare, both modes of analysis tend to hypostatize the signified-signifier, mind-matter distinction. Consequently, the specific historical relationships between structures of signification and social practices, in many respects, remain unanalyzed in theories of signs.

3. Skagestad (1981) has suggested that Peirce's thinking rests on two premises—verificationism and realism—that might be reconciled. Whereas reality manifests itself in a variety of everyday practices, scientific practices, by thematizing the conditions of knowledge whenever an aspect of reality is called into question, rely on a methodological conception of reality that implies that all knowledge

remains preliminary and, indeed, is subject to continuous challenge. Thus the *cogito* of Peircean pragmatism might have been, *Erro, ergo sum*. Again, the relevant question is not, What is reality? (that is, where, in which unitary set of phenomena, does it reside) but rather, When is reality, and for what purpose?

4. There may be an ambivalence in Habermas' position in relation to Peirce. The theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1981, 1984), while pointing to the three-term model of signs, refers to Peirce only in passing. This is despite the similarity between Habermas's ideal conditions of communication and Peirce's interpretive communities, particularly his Final Interpretant. Both authors entertain the notion of a realm of signs before or apart from social reality. While Habermas (1971) associates Peirce's philosophy with "an idealism that is not unlike Hegel's" (p. 111), the charge of German idealism thus would seem to apply equally to both positions. However, Habermas (1971) further argues that Peirce's notion of signs, ultimately, cannot solve the epistemological problem of how to infer the "out there" from the "in here"; it "does not suffice to explain how thought processes transform the *presymbolic influx* of information" (p. 107; emphasis added). Habermas, in contrast to Peirce, then, assumes a brute reality as well, a reality before or apart from signs.

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Semiological Struggles

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JENSEN'S account of the undeserved neglect of Peircean semiotics in favor of a Saussurean semiology is timely and provocative.¹ His densely packed and thoroughly researched argument is both a critical overview of our field's current attempts to come to grips with the problem of meaning and an attempt to argue that Peirce's theories may offer a set of insights that are more incisive than those with which we are currently working.

I am full of admiration for his critical summaries of the main theorists in the field, which deserve far more discussion and elaboration than would be possible in the space available to me. So I shall focus instead on the comparative contributions of Peirce and Saussure, or semiotics and semiology. And I must make my position clear: My academic development has taken place through Saussurean semiology, none of my writing or thinking is free of his formative influence, and I have no regrets about that, for I believe Saussure's wide-reaching influence to be thoroughly deserved.

Saussure's theories have generated more developments and argument than Peirce's, and there is a far larger body of work that is Saussurean and post-Saussurean (or even anti-Saussurean) than there is Peircean. True, but why? It is not that Peirce has been capriciously overlooked, or that he never wrote a book on semiotics but scattered his arguments throughout his voluminous and disorganized writings. The fact that no one has yet been able to edit his collected papers and produce from them a "Peircean semiotics" as the equivalent of the "Cours Generale" that Saussure's students produced from his lectures can be only part of the reason for the inequality of influence of the two founding fathers of the discipline.

More productive differences must be sought in the epistemological focuses of their theories, the ways of knowing that we are invited to bring to bear upon them and to develop from them. The key difference is a very simple one: Saussure is a linguist and Peirce is a logician. It all follows from that. Logicians investigate how

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sense is made by rational human beings; linguists focus on how meanings are generated and circulated socially. Peirce's *interpretant* is not a social being but a cognitive being divorced from any social or historical specificity. So, as Jensen cites him, he can define the Final Interpretant as "the effect the Sign would produce upon *any mind*" and, similarly, can define truth as "that of which *any person* would come to be convinced" (p. 10, emphases added). The idea of *any mind* or *any person* evidences an essentialist view of meaning that has quite justifiably proved unproductive, for meanings are socially produced and socially circulated: They change as they move through the social formation and as they move through history. A white, middle-class male living in the twentieth-century capitalist West lives with a very different set of meanings from those of his counterpart in the eighteenth century, or from those of a nineteenth-century African American, or from those of a contemporary woman in the so-called Third World. The examples proliferate endlessly.

Language changes over time; it differs between cultures, and even within the same society and historical period it is inflected differently by different social formations—class, race, gender, age, region, and so on. A semiotics based upon the mental processes of an essentialist, cognitive being is unable to address some of the most crucial problems of the late twentieth-century world—the problems of economic, social, and political inequality.

The understanding of reception to which Jensen claims Peirce's theory of the interpretant can lead us is a cognitive one, not a social one. When Peirce moves beyond a mentalistic account of meaning, it is to a concept of "the public" rather than "the social." The public, for Peirce, appears to be a communally consensual way of thinking that denies social difference or its historical production. His public—unlike, say, Habermas' "public sphere"—is not a historical product of the socially dominant, but rather a process that we might call one of inter cognition.

Jensen's use of the term *reception* is itself significant, for it implies a stage in the process of cognition. Those working in the post-Saussurean tradition, however, tend not to use it, preferring terms such as *reading* or even *production*, which emphasize the active role of the media user in the production of socially pertinent meanings from the text. The process of watching television, for example, is not called a process of reception, but one of production, or, in earlier, more ideologically inflected accounts, of reproduction. In literary theory, the term *reception theory* is typically used when the emphasis is upon a textually determined process of reading rather than a socially determined one.

I agree with Jensen's emphasis on the *when* of meaning and would add to it both a *where* and a *whose*. In other words, I would want to understand the *when* as a historical moment that is also situated specifically within a social formation rather than as a stage in a cognitive process as would Peirce. The right sort of language theory has a social and historical dimension in the way that logic does not, and that cognitive theory tends to minimize if not ignore.

Its potential for sociohistorical specificity is not the only reason a linguistically focused semiology has proved more generative than a semiotics derived from logic

or cognitive theory. Another is what we might call its homologic potential. I stress the word *potential* because I do not wish to claim that Saussure's structural account of language is either complete or adequate. It is not, but it *is* generative. In fact, Peirce's semiotics is a far more developed theory than either Saussure's semiology (which consists of no more than a widely cited embryonic paragraph) or even his theory of language itself. Although Saussure says quite firmly that language is a social fact, he expends all his investigative energy upon the linguistic system and none at all upon the social system or upon the relations between the two. But the fact that Saussure's theory is structural, rather than essentialist, has allowed Jacobsen, for example, to establish that the phonetic system is homologically equivalent to the verbal system, and Lévi-Strauss to use language as the base homologue by which to explain almost every cultural system from cooking to mythology.

The generativity of Saussure not only outweighs the incompleteness of his own work, but may actually be a product of it. Thus his insistence on the arbitrary nature of the sign has had far greater implications than any he himself envisaged. When he argued that "value" (the relationship of a sign to others in the system) rather than "significance" (the relationship of a sign to an external referent) was the prime producer of meaning he opened up a wonderful Pandora's box of theoretical possibilities. For instance, he made it possible to link a theory of ideology to a theory of language and thus to admit Marxism and structuralism into a long-lasting and productive marriage based upon a core of similarity (that knowledge is relational and that social systems, whether economic or linguistic, can be understood only structurally, not essentially) but in which each compensated for the other's deficiencies: Structural linguistics compensated for Marxism's lack of a theory of language and Marxism compensated for structuralism's lack of a theory of social difference.

Peirce's triad of sign-object-interpretant posits a sign-object relationship that, however modified by the three-storied processes of the interpretant, finally ties some part of the meaning of the sign to a positivist reality. For Peirce, therefore, there is a part of meaning that is grounded in universal, eternal nature, not in culture: It lies outside the social production of meaning and is therefore not available for the exercise of social power. The cognitivism of Peirce's interpretant is the equivalent of the objectivism of his sign—both tie the meaning-making process to ahistorical factors, the human mind or external reality.

The arbitrary nature of Saussure's sign, however, has produced theories of meaning as being entirely a social product and, therefore, as part of the distribution of power in society and as part of the social struggle which the inequities of that distribution necessarily produce. Marx's famous dictum that the ideas of the ruling class become the ideas of their time is as provocative and undeveloped as Saussure's definition of semiology as the life of signs within society. But when the two were brought together, as, for instance, in the work of Barthes and Hall, there resulted a substantial body of work that traced the social and semiotic processes by which the ideas of the ruling classes established themselves as the common sense

of society and, equally, showed how the linguistic system was put to use in historically and socially specific conjunctures.

In a different but equally productive move, Lacan argued that Freud's theories of the unconscious were structuralist and were homologous to the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified. His theory of the development of subjectivity as an entry into a meaning system produced a body of work that explained the development of subjectivity as the equivalent at the level of the individual to ideology at the level of the social. This enabled Marx's undeveloped theory of consciousness to be explained and elaborated psychoanalytically, in the same way structural linguists fleshed out his ideas on the social power of knowledge.

Feminists in particular have found the marriage of semiology and psychoanalysis particularly fruitful, and have given us incisive accounts of how patriarchal power is exerted through systems of representation. Indeed, the theory of representation could have evolved only within a Saussurean rather than a Peircean theory of signs, for it too depends upon arbitrariness for its thesis that what sign systems do is represent the dominant ideology rather than an external reality.

Psychoanalysis has also given us the concept of repression: As the unconscious represses certain experiences and memories in order to produce a socially functional consciousness, so signs can produce socially functional meanings only by repressing others. The significant absence or silence is a concept in both psychoanalytic and ideological theory that argues that what is not said is at least as significant as, if not more significant than, what is. Because the repressed meanings are systematically and not occasionally repressed, they can be recovered by structural analysis. The cognitivist and pragmaticist thrust of Peircean semiotics makes it almost impossible for it to include notions of repression, silence, and absence in its account of meaning, for all of these concepts contain traces of opposition or struggle that make them structuralist and not positivist.

Saussure, Marx, and Freud are arguably the three thinkers who have produced a twentieth-century epistemology that is fundamentally one of structural relativity and thus contradicts the nineteenth century's emphasis on objectivism and positivism. In the 1970s, in Britain and Europe particularly, a major body of theoretical and analytical work developed that brought together insights from these three seminal thinkers to produce a comprehensive account of the political work of meaning generation and distribution in the white patriarchal capitalist societies in which we live. It was comprehensive because it traced homologous relationships between economic and ideological structures, between the structures of consciousness and subjectivity, and between linguistic and semiotic structures. Its ability to comprehend the domains of language, consciousness, and society gave it an enormous epistemological scope. The importance of Saussure is not to be found in his own (very limited) works, but in the productive and generative relationships that they have formed with those of other major theorists of their time. It remains to be seen whether the relationship of Peirce's semiotics with pragmatism and cognitivism can be as fertile: Certainly Jensen argues convincingly for its potential.

But the generativity of Saussure's ideas has not been confined to elaborating them and relating them to others: They have spawned disagreements that have proved as valuable as the developments. Such attacks on his thought are still Saussurean because they either take place within the frame he established or use his conceptual apparatus as the starting point from which to establish contradictory ones.

For materialist linguists, Saussure's theory was not so much wrong as upside down. Volosinov (1973) and Hodge and Kress (1988), for example, argue within Saussure's framework but against his priorities. His prioritization of *langue* over *parole*, of the paradigmatic over the syntagmatic, of the synchronic over the diachronic, and finally of the signifier over the signified should, they argue, be reversed in order to understand not what the linguistic system is, but how it is used in specific social situations. For Volosinov meaning is produced not by the linguistic system alone but at its intersection with a social system at its moments of use. So the same sign in the same linguistic structures can be accented differently according to its social point of usage. Signs are signs only when they pass between socially located beings, and thus signs can best be understood as part of social relations, rather than as part of a linguistic system. Signs are "multi-accental" because they can form different social relations according to who speaks them, and as the key social relations in capitalist societies are ones of struggle, so the multiaccentality of signs enables and ensures their entry into that struggle. The struggle over meaning is part of the social struggle, as feminists have understood so well. The form that the struggle for meaning takes is historically specific (diachronic rather than synchronic) and is fought out in speech acts (paroles and syntagms) rather than at the structural level (*langue* and paradigms). But the relationship between the uses of a system and the system itself is organic, each use modifies or confirms the system, however minutely, and it is only in its uses that one can trace the mechanisms and processes of change.

Although Saussure may, according to this view, have gotten his priorities wrong, he did at least stress that meaning is not produced when a single sign comes into relationship with an interpretant and a piece of reality, but when it comes into relationship with other signs, whether paradigmatically into a relation of difference, or syntagmatically into one of combination. Saussure modeled the relationship of syntagm to paradigm and *langue* to *parole* as a symptomatic one — *paroles* and syntagms were the material realizations of the potential of the abstract paradigm and *langue*. The symptoms were the only way to study the system, and, equally, were valuable only as symptomatic of that system. For material linguists or social semiologists, however, the relationship can be antagonistic. *Langue* and the paradigmatic dimension are bearers of social power in a way that Saussure never realized: Their historically specific uses, however, can resist or oppose the power inscribed in them. Language's ability to play an active rather than reflective role in social change can be traced only through a focus on *parole* and syntagmatic specificities.

So the macrostructural studies (Saussurean-Marxian-Freudian) also produced historically and socially situated studies of the system in use. These initially centered on resistant or negotiated uses whereby subordinated groups devised their own tactics to cope with the system that subordinated them. They began to investigate the relationship between semiotic resistance and social resistance, which raised the questions of under what specific conditions the struggle for meaning could become a social struggle, and under what conditions a social struggle could move between the micro and macro levels of social relationships. The recent inflections of structuralism have tended to emphasize the practices, both semiotic and social, by which people use for their interests the resources of the system within (and against) which they live their everyday lives. But such studies are always situated within the framework whose priorities they oppose but whose structure they accept.

So, too, many of the theories that have been categorized as poststructuralist or deconstructive depend directly upon the arbitrary nature of the sign as embodied in the signifier-signified relationship. If meaning cannot be produced finally at the intersection between a sign and a fixed referent (whether an objectivist reality or a cognitivist mind), then meaning is in constant process. The signified is not a referential anchor for the signifier, but becomes itself a signifier in an unending chain of "deferral" by which meaning is never made but is always in the making.

Similarly, postmodern theories of the simulacrum rely on the arbitrariness of the sign in order to contradict the dualism of the signifier/signified concept and of the relationship of similarity and difference by which social systems and representational systems are, in structuralism, made to make sense of each other. A simulacrum and a hyperreality are "implosive" concepts that collapse into themselves the polarities of the signifier/signified and the representational/the social.

We may not be comfortable with the epistemological crisis diagnosed for us by poststructuralism, deconstructionism, and postmodernism, but we have to recognize how widely accepted it has become: It is the perhaps inevitable outcome of the structural relativity of what I have claimed to be the defining characteristic of twentieth-century thought. It is contradicted from within its own tradition by the focus on material practices rather than overarching structures or grand narratives, and from without by the sort of Peircean pragmatism promoted by Jensen. My brief account of why Saussurean semiology has, up to now at least, proved more generative than Peircean semiotics should be read historically, not essentially. Saussure's is not an inherently "better" theory, but it has proved itself better able to offer more socially powerful explanations of what it claims to be the key features of twentieth-century experience. As our historical conditions change, and change they must, maybe a more positivist and pragmatic epistemology will replace a structural relativist one: I remain to be convinced.

NOTE

1. I follow Jensen's use of the terms *semiology* and *semiotics* to refer to the Saussurean and Peircean schools, respectively. This is a useful rhetorical device for this essay, but it is not normal usage: The term *semiotics* frequently refers to the Saussurean tradition.

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The Search for Media Meaning

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IN his essay, Jensen focuses on one of the central questions in contemporary media studies. He is concerned with the role of media “audiences” in creating, modifying, constructing, or reconstructing (depending on one’s prior assumptions) meaning from and within mass-mediated communication. He not only frames his problem in terms of the shift in media studies to conceptions of active audiences, by now a commonly accepted notion across various approaches to the study of mass communication, but asks us to consider appropriate levels of analysis within audience studies.

I agree with this general approach. Analysis remaining at the general, “structural” level assumes too much, establishes too little, and results in cynical, circular critiques of broad-scale social patterns. Most of these analyses are critiques of capitalism, or American capitalism, or BBC hegemony, or “privatization,” or “media imperialism” more than they are critiques of specific media processes. As such broad-scale critiques take media content and media institutions as their focus, they may be quite useful. Still, within such analysis no answer to any problem can be sufficient without wholesale social reconstruction.

At the other end of the spectrum, generalized fervor for the power of individual appropriation of mass-mediated messages in “subverting” or “rereading” media content leads into a swamp of solipsism. Finally, no understanding is possible. Intersubjectivity disappears. Society crumbles. Culture dissolves. This approach (characterized here in extreme fashion) seems to me patently incompatible with much that we know about mass-mediated communication, particularly, for my concerns, much that we know about the generation and perpetuation of entertainment forms.

Jensen’s plea is for a middle ground, though he might object, on the face of it, to my spatial metaphor. The question remains: If we cannot deduce media effectivity from theoretical constructs and if the sum of myriad individual experiences

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never coheres into any significant pattern, where do we look for media meaning and how do we study it?

Jensen's answer is to call for what he refers to as "a social semiotics." Such an approach depends, or at least benefits, in his view, from an exploration of a relatively new source for media studies, Peircean semiotics. It also recalls, especially for American scholarly communities, the significance of a Habermasian perspective on the public sphere. After exploring the assumptions of other scholars regarding the construction of meaning in and from mass media, and after introducing his distillation of these "new" sources, Jensen suggests a possible direction:

In particular, a social semiotics may produce models for relating a social-institutional level of analysis with analyses of the interpretive strategies of individual communicants. After a decade where much empirical attention has been given to the microsocial level of reception and to the discursive aspect of meaning production, it may be time to refocus on their interrelations with the macrosocial level of institutions and classes. What is at stake in mass communication, after all, is control over an important means of inquiry into social reality. (p. 26)

As stated earlier, I tend to agree with this conclusion — insofar as I understand its terms. Unfortunately, and somewhat paradoxically, the links in Jensen's chain of argument are often weaker than his basic assumptions and his admirable conclusions. This suggests that while I, and perhaps many others, might agree with the general aspects of his approach, finding common ground on what is to be done next might be difficult. The programmatic implications of Jensen's pronouncements are thin, and, to my thinking, not all that far removed from much of the work produced in the "previous decade" he cites. Put another way, this essay, clearly designed to provoke, to critique some currently prominent approaches, to redirect, and to lead in new directions, is unlikely to alter research agendas in any major way. This is the case because many researchers, some of Jensen's "targets" among them, are already doing more of what he suggests than he allows. It is also the case because, fortunately, research communities now seem much more aware of the cumulative, even dialectical, progress we make rather than simply maintaining dependence upon the coherent, hermetic nature of research of earlier periods. In this regard, Jensen's essay makes its major contribution by reminding us of other sources for thinking that can contribute to and refine our approaches even if they do not revolutionize them. It sounds other voices, often noticed but seldom heard in meaningful ways. It enriches the discussion that constitutes — slight, halting, meandering — progress in the human sciences. This is most evident in the internal workings of Jensen's essay in the back-and-forth movement between aspects of mass communication that structure or direct interpretation and interpretive moves that may sometimes, somehow, modify those structuring devices. In spite of an attempt to make his approach into something new, Jensen's analysis does not escape this movement. Indeed, in the end, it is constrained by old, familiar questions and by an old and familiar inability to resolve them. To explore some of

these issues more closely, to examine both the weaknesses and strengths of the essay, I intend to look at its parts in the order of their presentation.

EPISTEMOLOGY AND DISCOURSE

The first sections of Jensen's chapter demonstrate the difficulties encountered by any scholar wishing to redirect thinking in the field we know as communication or media research. Because we do not deal with a bounded and defined discipline, with an agreed-upon body of texts, procedures, and central questions, such an effort is too often preoccupied with recultivating ground already cleared and replanted many times. In the present case we deal with multiple applications of the term *discourse*, and wind up with a rather simple pronouncement that Jensen chooses to "focus on the level of theoretical discourse" (p. 6). By this he means he will work on explanation of data at a level that can be applied in social practice. This is in contrast, in his view, to work performed at the level of "epistemological discourse," which can trap its practitioners "within the epistemological loop" and "jeopardize their claim to a discursive position from which they might address mass communication as an aspect of social reality" (p. 5). Put another way, if we worry solely about how we know what we know, we will be unable to act.

My concern here is not with such a conclusion, but with whether or not we have to be walked through this discussion in order to reach it. Perhaps my concerns are more editorial here than substantive, but I think not. The step taken, to focus on "theoretical" discourse, hardly allows one to step outside epistemology, a clear impossibility. Instead, Jensen simply indicates that he assumes an epistemology that privileges social action rather than wallows in confusion over how to act. This privileging is clearly indicated when he cites, with approval, Hartley's (1988) claim that scholarly analysis has a clear rhetorical dimension, that one aim of scholarship, among others, is to decide that some interpretations are better than others and to attempt to "*persuade*" audiences to "take up" those more appropriate positions. A valuable idea, it is almost buried in a section bent on clarifying related matters.

INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES, LEVEL OF ANALYSIS, AND AUDIENCE FREEDOMS

Jensen's next section, "Where Is Meaning," is a valuable summary of the development of assumptions about communication built on a spatial metaphor. Descartes and Locke are quickly related to "mainstream" communication theory of an earlier generation and iconic names—Lasswell, Shannon and Weaver—are invoked to suggest how we sometimes got ourselves into trouble with these unexamined assumptions. Similarly, Saussure and Jakobson, icons of another, interpretive, tradition, are also linked to the spatial concept, and, appropriately in

my view, found wanting for engendering a too-narrow focus on media structures and products rather than on media processes.

Such a focus on process, Jensen suggests, necessarily shifts our dominant metaphor for communication from space to time. Thus the questions shift: No longer are we concerned with “where” meaning resides, but with “when” it occurs. As he calls up Peirce’s semiotic theory, explicates, and applies it to mass communication, Jensen does indeed profitably shift emphasis to process and context, to the social and public nature of communication, to interaction, verification, and action. He moves from Peirce’s notion of scientific communities of knowers, relatively homogeneous and organized, to the multiply involved interpretive communities that deal with mass communication. These latter may shift and change with regard to different media content, use, and display. The interpretive strategies they employ “may be mutually inconsistent, or *contradictory*, because they derive from different contexts or represent the orientations of different social formations that may be in conflict” (p. 14). In short, they are not nearly so clean and distinct as the Peircean communities, and because they are involved with so much mediated communication, they may be quite difficult to pin down for study.

At this point, roughly halfway through his essay, Jensen seems to be leaning toward the newer concerns for microlevel analysis. So much diversity and difference would seem to drive any reception analysis in that direction, this in spite of the hesitation he seemed to express for this sort of analysis earlier. Or perhaps it would be better to say that he leans in this direction with all the earlier reservations in mind, suggesting that a stronger form of this microanalysis is forthcoming, or that some clearer suggestion for a midlevel analysis is in the offing.

Instead, the next move is indicative of that dual thrust, oscillating between the structures of mediated content and the freedom to deflect or refract those structures. “Genres . . . invite recipients to take particular stances with implied social roles (Williams, 1977), thus contributing to the building of specific interpretive communities” (p. 14). Specific texts (e.g., *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*) orient interpretations. Education itself, while offering critical skills, nevertheless structures interpretation through canon formation and instructional strategies. Similarly, certain social practices, “socially meaningful activities” (p. 15), such as gendered behavior, social organization, or the family, can restrict or direct interpretation.

Still, because all of us are members of varied communities or groups, because we are structured by multiple discourse systems, the various restricting devices may be at odds with one another. As Jensen puts it, “One may detect several contradictory constructions of political institutions that emerge as ambiguity, or polysemy, in audience discourses” (p. 16). This statement, in addition to summarizing once again the swinging focus between structure and freedom, signals a transition into Jensen’s only offer of specific analysis in his essay. It comes here, appropriately, because the essay has reached the point of asking, “Okay, which is it, structure (content, text, message), or use (audience, freedom of interpretation, individual)? If neither (or both, in some innovative mixture missed before), what

is this new processual, midground, Peircean-based analysis?" And it is also at this point that Jensen is compelled to respond to other scholars who have raised some of the same issues. Thus the applied section of the essay calls for a close look.

John Fiske's arguments for the counterhegemonic aspects of popular entertainment, specifically of television, have called forth considerable response. (See, in addition to the present example, Condit, 1989.) Assertive, persuasive, synthetic in the best sense, *Television Culture* (Fiske, 1987) is the first overview of television built around the particular issues addressed here. It deals with the interactions among active audiences, complex popular texts, and political discourses. The very organization of the book tends, as Jensen suggests, toward privileging audience freedom to subvert the hegemonic structures produced by socially central institutions and governed by the yawning maw of advertising as a sociopolitical practice.

Jensen points out, of course, that "Fiske (1987) is careful to qualify his argument at various points lest he be thought to overestimate what might be called a 'pseudo-power' (p. 318)" (p. 17). This is true, and Jensen would do well to point out the different qualifications in their different contexts to do justice to Fiske, especially since he becomes the primary whipping boy for a much too lax approach to audiences' interpretive freedom. Instead, Jensen merely dismisses one of Fiske's primary arguments, and summarizes: "This makes fantasy a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of social change" (p. 17). The qualifications alluded to in Fiske's book make precisely the same point. What Jensen overlooks is exactly what he calls for in other places. He fails to see Fiske's work as a social act, performed in specific social contexts. He fails, in short, to see Fiske's book as an intervention in the same ongoing debate Jensen addresses. I am particularly interested in this issue because some of the same charges have been leveled against my own work, despite its fundamental differences from Fiske's. Indeed, to move ahead slightly, Jensen suggests something of the same critique in his discussion of the cultural forum model of network television proposed by Paul Hirsch and myself (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1984).

What Jensen fails to recognize, or wishes not to acknowledge, is that in the continuing discussion of the ideological role of mass media in general and television in particular, *necessary is enough*, and far more than many previous scholars have allowed. Indeed, it would be helpful if Jensen — or someone, anyone — would define *sufficient* conditions for social change.

But perhaps I become too harsh or too particular. Part of the problem here is that in the tradition of the humanities, in their contribution to the human sciences as opposed to the contributions of what we generally know as social science, one too often feels compelled to write "*as if*" one's claims are stronger or larger than they actually can ever be. It would be wise for many of us to write more tentatively, but editors have a way of suggesting that those who hesitate are lost already, and unworthy of serious consideration. So much for a digression on the rhetoric of scholarly analysis. Structurally, however, in his essay, Jensen's discussion of Fiske is also a digression. Ostensibly he feels compelled to discuss Fiske because Fiske's account of polysemy is "the most detailed" (p. 17). Actually, Jensen discusses not

Fiske's account of polysemy, but the suggested ideological effects of polysemic media content. He would have done better to stick with the stated purpose, for his own use of "polysemy" as a definition of multiple interpretive strategies within single audience groups or members is unwieldy and unusual. It needs defense and explanation to avoid the sort of problem caused by his own statement equating polysemy with ambiguity (p. 17).

CONCLUSIONS

Jensen's search for the midlevel in his Peircean-based analysis remains unfulfilled. His desire to make social institutions and practices, such as the actual organizations and assumptions defining "news," into the link that defines that level is not supported here. Indeed, if contradictions in consciousness (in individuals or in groups such as "interpretive communities") can "derive from" contradictions at the level of macrosocial institutions, we are back to a form of spatial description. Meaning somehow originates in one place and, in some undefined manner, is transmitted to another. While this model permits a more process-oriented analysis, that kind of analysis does not appear here. If Jensen could show the process of that transference, using Peircean terms and procedures, he would go far in convincing me that he is onto something new.

Instead he moves ahead to discuss mass media as the locus of information *about* institutions. Here he discusses my own work and I will respond briefly, passing over a number of quibbles I have long since decided are more the result of imprecise statement on my part than of misinterpretation by my critics. I will comment, then, only on the part of the argument that continues this discussion of the relations among media content, social institutions, and audiences.

The main limitation of the [cultural forum] analysis is that it represents a perspective from only one type of social institution, namely, mass media. What is not considered are the relations of feedback between the mass media and other institutions, in the present case TV news media and political institutions. Unlike geological faults, social fault lines, once identified, might be acted upon. (p. 22)

I point out first that geologic faults can, and often must, be acted upon. But to do that, one must have a map. Indeed, because many types of maps are useful in the process, one needs as many maps as possible. One purpose of the cultural forum model is simply to provide a different type of map of content found in popular entertainment of particular sorts. Such a map is presented in terms different from prior understandings of television content and suggests that the medium might serve as a metaphor for social fault lines.

I point out next that all the questions Jensen suggests as unanswered by the forum model are in fact engendered by that model, as was intended. Prior to the promulgation of that model most media research, particularly that deriving from

the hermeneutic tradition, *assumed* homogeneity in television content. The forum model at least insists that that assumption be tested empirically. Jensen's questions—for example, "Which sectors of society . . . are likely never to be subject to television representation . . . ?" (p. 22)—can be explored quite fully using this model. (His conclusion from that question, "and hence [never to be subject] to any form of negotiation" [p. 22] simply does not follow. As Fiske, among others, has often remarked, exnomination is indeed a form of cultural negotiation, quite likely to provoke just the sort of macrosocial institutional political behavior Jensen calls for. This is the point Fiske was making with his comment on homogeneous programming. And the "comparative evidence" Jensen finds lacking for this "effect" [p. 22] exists throughout the literature on special interest groups.) All this suggests that any analysis of the "where" or the "when" of meaning will be affected by our models of the "what" of meaning, a topic Jensen deals with only implicitly.

His remarks about the shortcomings of the forum model are often well taken, but there is an element in his critique that indicates he finds the work wanting merely because it does not do what it was never intended to do. As with Fiske's work, Jensen has ignored the specific social (i.e., academic, institutional, historical, and rhetorical) context in which the work appeared. Once again, his own analysis seems to violate his preferred model of communication research.

Having found all his examples wanting in forging satisfactory links among audience interpretation, media content, and social institutions, Jensen returns to Peirce to expand the discussion of applicable elements of pragmatism. And here he also turns to another major model in the work of Habermas. Especially significant is the judicious critique of Habermas. Jensen carefully points out the idealistic nature of Habermas's theory of communicative action, referring to it as a "last-ditch articulation of the question, Where is meaning?" (p. 25). But beyond this he draws on Habermas to show that we should all be aware of the interests underlying our own research. And one of the clearest statements of Jensen's aim comes in his description of the project of Gadamer, Habermas, and Rorty. It is their "common agenda," he suggests, to work out "a theory of communication that addresses the historical origins and social uses of meaning" (p. 24). Again, I agree that this aim is worthy, and any progress toward this sort of practice is urgently needed. Jensen is to be applauded for foregrounding the call.

The penultimate section of Jensen's essay, preceding a general restatement of his major points in the conclusion, is titled "Toward a Pragmatist Theory of Mass Communication" (p. 25). Here we find the clear statement of what this journey through various theories and models leads to: "In particular, a social semiotics may produce models for relating a social-institutional level of analysis with analyses of the interpretive strategies of individual communicants" (p. 26). Unfortunately, for reasons cited above, Jensen's suggestions do not add up to a workable model for analyzing these relations. In case after case he leans too far in one direction or another. Often he relies heavily on deterministic structures and institutions. Yet in his one instance of applied analysis, he goes too far in the other direction,

depending on narrow readings of source interviews. By example, most likely unintended, he shows us just how difficult a goal he has set.

That goal has been a common one for the past decade. Many of the researchers Jensen criticizes have offered partial approaches for achieving it—swaying, tightroping on whatever line divides structurally determined, socioideological effects from free, multiple, solipsistic, exciting, and potentially useless individual interpretation. A model for resolving tension between the perspectives or for studying the relationship has not emerged. The flawed, struggling attempts are the best we have.

Jensen now offers his version, and takes us a step further along. His critiques of current scholarship, despite their flaws, will aid in more precise understanding. His citation of Habermas reminds us of the social interests that should drive our work. His recovery of Peirce provides a needed corrective to the limitations of other forms of semiotic/semiological analysis. It is especially important that the critiques and the new or reiterated sources should be presented in the context of qualitative audience research, currently theorized and demanded by so many and practiced by so few. I wish Jensen had shown more of his own and others' applied qualitative audience research instead of diving so deeply into theoretical discussion. His theories, as I have already suggested, are not so new, or so different. His analysis of applied work would be as valuable as what is presented here.

But this is the essay he wrote. And this is the one I have tried, after the habit, the practice, the interest of textual analysis as I know it, to wrench into my own misrestatement.

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