



Postmodernism and New Media

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Teaching Notes

Postmodern Approaches

Postmodern approaches offer a fundamentally different type of explanation for the impact on audiences of all types of media, old and particularly new, initially in terms of **ethnographic** analyses of audiences. These move the debate away from an analysis of 'the media' to a cultural analysis of audiences and how they interact with different media.



One important dimension here is a move away from the notion of mass audiences, in terms of their actions and reactions, to audiences **differentiated** by age, gender and ethnicity as well as by more individualised categories such as cultural and technological competence - although these are, of course, related in various ways to categories like age and gender.

This **methodological shift** reflects a postmodern concern with how and why media are used in the construction of personal and social **identities**, an important component of which is how we understand and use media technologies. Ethnographic approaches, in this respect, explore media use in terms of ideas like **social space** and how the media is integrated into different spaces – especially the **private space** of the home.

Understanding how audiences use media involves examining how domestic spaces are structured, from relatively simple issues such as 'who uses what media in what contexts for what purpose', to more complex issues about control and ownership of technology and how media use fits into the general flow of domestic behaviour.

A further strand focuses on exploring **cultural competence**; how audiences bring different levels of **literacy** to their media use. An obvious example here is the Internet and debates over the extent to which children should be supervised.

How people use the media – and what they take from it – depends on their familiarity with that media; this extends from things like understanding the conventions of films, through the expectations we have for different media, to the ability to master different technologies.

A further dimension is how we engage with **technology** – the hardware and software that increasingly surrounds us. Forty years ago British audiences had to cope with two television channels. Now, we are surrounded by technology, from multiple television channels to smartphones and tablet computers.



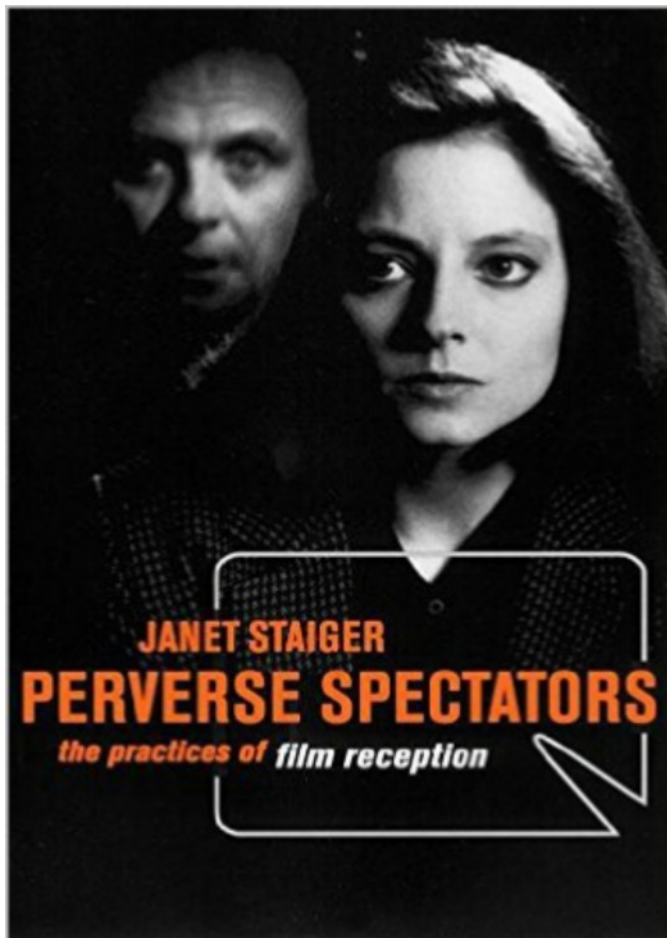
Post-effects

Postmodernism also embodies a different **theoretical** approach to understanding new media and audiences. It suggests conventional media effects theories have been looking for the wrong things in the wrong places in the wrong ways.

Despite their differences, conventional effects theories all share the assumption that a distinction can be made between media *producers* and *consumers*.

- **Traditional Marxism** sees the relationship as clear and separate: producers are the dominant partner.
- **Neo-Marxism** sees the relationship as more ambivalent: producers dominate in some respects, but consumers have a significant interpretative role.
- **Interactionists / Pluralists** see the dominant role is played by consumers, able to pick and choose various forms of media consumption that meet their particular needs and purposes.

Postmodernism, however, focuses on the concept of **meaning**; where conventional media effects theories assume, as we've just noted, a separation between 'the media' and 'the audience' **Staiger** (2000) argues the media have no **immanent meaning** (one that is fixed and unchanging). Audiences, she argues, are **perverse spectators**; they use media in their own way and for whatever purpose through **activated meanings**.



These are meanings created through the ways an audience interacts with media.

In other words, the meaning of a soap opera is created and expressed in numerous ways by whatever a viewer brings to their consumption and enjoyment of the programme; the meaning of *EastEnders* or a news broadcast changes each and every time it is viewed by different individuals, making it impossible to quantify 'media effects' in any meaningful or coherent way since any 'effect' is changed each time it is identified. This idea holds true for both the present – the meaning of a media text is changed immediately it is consumed – and, most obviously, the past; films, for example, that were once considered shocking are now more likely to elicit laughter than fear.

Audience as media

Perhaps the most radical way of understanding the relationship between audience and media is to think about the changing face of media technology and use. If we think, for example, about **new media**, such as blogs or social networks, the audience is both the **producer** and **consumer** of media texts; the audience *is* the media and the media *is* the audience – the two are interchangeable and indistinguishable. One is simply a reflection of the other.



This idea, although shot through with debates about media literacies, competencies and the uneven spread of technological development, is significant because it suggests a different direction for media research and effects theories. Although a producer may have some idea about how they would *like* an audience to receive and understand their text, each reader interprets the text in terms of their own ideas, beliefs, cultural and technological backgrounds.

Effects of the media on wider society

Debates over media effects polarise around two opposing interpretations; those (traditional and neo-Marxism) who see the media as having significant effects and those (Interpretivists and Postmodernists) who, for differing reasons, see the conventional idea of media effects as limited at best. While these debates tend to focus on individuals and groups within society (differentiated in various ways by class, age, gender and ethnicity) there is a broader debate about the role and effects of media in society as a whole. Unsurprisingly, these debates also polarise between those who see the role of the media **positively**, as a force for liberation and freedom and those who see it more **negatively** - as a force for oppression and control.

Before we outline examples of these positions it's important to note that the debate has moved on in recent years, with the development of new media forms that both challenge and complement old media forms. As recently as a generation ago the debate was framed in terms of national borders and the impact of state controls on media that operated within a broadly national context (with obvious exceptions, such as the American film industry).

Presently the debate is increasingly framed around **globalisation**, its implications and tendencies. Cultural institutions such as the media, in a similar way to economic institutions and, to a lesser extent, political institutions, increasingly operate on a global scale and this has important implications for the role of the media across both national and international borders



Positive

Postmodernists point to a range of ideas to support the argument that the media has a range of *beneficial* effects, one of the most significant being **choice**; the **diversity** of available media reflects every viewpoint and no viewpoint - an apparent contradiction resolved by observing that as media becomes more diverse it comes to represent and reflect a range of competing worldviews rather than a single worldview. No single narrative or indeed discourse is able to dominate.

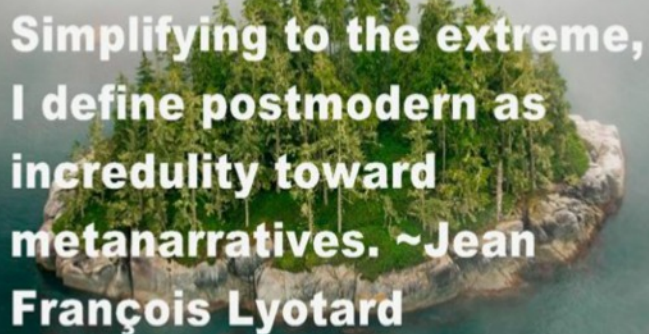
Culturally, choice and diversity has a knock-on effect across a range of institutions and behaviours.



Gender and **age** groups, for example, find themselves **empowered** by greater freedom of personal expression and a less restrictive moral order, as reflected in the media. **Butler** (1990), for example, argues gender scripts are no longer limited and restrictive, but many and varied; there are now more ways to "perform gender". The same holds broadly true for age-related behaviour.

More generally, a significant media effect is the creation of a greater **global awareness** of economic trends (such as the development of areas like China and India as important production centres), political developments - events surrounding the 2011 Arab Spring, for example, were extensively reported through Twitter in the absence of more traditional media - and cultural exchanges involving a greater exposure to and understanding of cultural differences.

Politically, media choice and diversity brings with it a greater questioning of "authority". **Lyotard** (1984), for example, argues a defining feature of postmodernity is its 'incredulity towards grand narratives' - the "big stories", such as religion, science or political philosophies, that claim to explain "everything about something". Postmodernity also involves a **scepticism** towards claims of "truth" as an objective category - truth and falsity can only be distinguished subjectively, on the basis of our values. Such incredulity towards **metanarratives** means all forms of media - old and new - are less likely to influence our long-term behaviour in the way they might once have done in the past.



**Simplifying to the extreme,
I define postmodern as
incredulity toward
metanarratives. ~Jean
François Lyotard**

A further political dimension facilitated by the development of new media is the changing nature of representation - the public can not only interact directly with elected politicians, through email and social networks, they can organise quickly and easily around political issues to put pressure on politicians to act in particular ways.

New media opens-up greater opportunities for discussion and self-expression, with voices being heard that in the past went unheard. This, in turn, has a significant impact on how we understand the deviance of political leaders or large-scale transnational corporations; both, for example, are under increasing surveillance "from below" (sousveillance)

Economically, the development of computer networks has presented problems for media industries whose products are easy to copy and distribute, with no loss of quality thanks to digital reproduction. Global media conglomerates have responded in a range of ways, from legal prosecutions of individual offenders and

attempts to shut-down illegal providers (such as Napster in the past and Megaupload more recently), to the development of new economic models. "Freemium" models, for example, provide a service (such as software or a game) for free but users then pay for "added extras". Hugely popular Facebook games, such as Farmville, have successfully applied this model.

Negative

Those who argue for the media having a generally negative effect point to a different set of ideas.

Economically, global processes of **concentration** and **conglomeration** have accelerated, with giant media corporations dividing-up global markets and operating as an **oligarchy** that prevents entrance to media markets, restricts competition and limits consumer choice. Rather than media *diversity*, **Lechner** (2001) argues there is a tendency towards **homogenisation**; the global reach of transnational media corporations creates a particular kind of "consumerist culture, in which standard commodities are promoted by global marketing campaigns to create similar lifestyles".

The development of peer-to-peer networks has led to the exponential rise of **intellectual property theft** ("piracy") which, while a problem for mega-corporations, may be economically disastrous for small production companies.



On a national level the ease with which media can be duplicated has led to widespread disregard for copyright and patent rights, plus the state-sponsored hacking of commercial secrets.

In 2010, for example, the American government claimed the theft of copyrights and patents by China remained at "unacceptable levels".

Politically, new global media corporations, such as Google and Facebook, have tended to cooperate with oppressive regimes rather than challenge their legitimacy. In China, for example, state censorship of both traditional and new media remains the norm with both indigenous and Western media companies; Yahoo, for example, censors its Chinese search results to exclude information banned by the Chinese government.



While Western democracies don't operate the same type and level of media **censorship** as countries like China (with their "Great Firewall" that blocks access to banned sites and web pages), control and surveillance has been extended through new technology and new media.

This has led, some have argued, to the development of a new "surveillance capitalism" - in return for allowing users free use of their platform (from search engines like Google to social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter) new media companies gain access to have amounts of valuable user data that can then be aggregated and sold to advertisers.

Social networking sites, for example, collect, store and sell extensive personal information about users, while mobile phone technology can be used to both track individuals and monitor their contacts.

The lack of new media **regulation** allows the expression of racist, sexist and homophobic ideas in ways that would be unacceptable - and probably illegal - among old media.

Culturally, global media are instrumental in fostering **cultural hegemony**, whereby local cultures are colonised by the products and lifestyles of dominant cultures, one example being the global domination of the American film industry.

Global media corporations have encouraged the spread of a particular form of economic ideology based around **individualism** and the *fetishisation of the self* (because we're worth it).

Kraeplin (2007), for example, notes how "Popular teen magazines link appearance and consumerism" and **Postman** (1985) argues a variety of "open admission technologies", such as television, are changing the way we see the relationship between age categories like childhood and adulthood.

Where the Internet, in particular, cannot differentiate between adults and children the latter are exposed to images of adulthood (sex, violence, news and so forth) that diminish our ability to decide where childhood ends and adulthood begins: children become more like adults in terms of their general behaviour, sexuality, dress and language while adults become more "childlike" in their equation of youthfulness with health, vitality and excitement.



Globalised media, in this respect, contribute to the development of a **consumption culture** where the consumption of goods and services - from mobile phones to social networks funded by advertising - is as end in itself, rather than a means towards an end.

