

Understanding Audience Understanding

Paul A. Soukup, S.J.

Communication study has approached the issue of audience understanding of messages from the perspective of the message and from that of the audience. On the one hand, the “powerful-message” construct paints the audience as passive recipients of the meaning presented in the media. On the other hand, the “active audience” construct places most interpretive power in the audience, stressing their selectivity of messages, their use of the media, their social positions, and their ability to generate new messages based on the media. A middle position sees audience understanding emerge from an interaction between messages and audience members.

The American Bible Society’s Multimedia Translations Project provides an interesting case study for reflection on the process of communication. By combining biblical translation with new media formats, it cuts across several boundaries of communication study—concern with and for the text, message formation, technical skills, and audience analysis. While communication research might legitimately contribute to each of these areas, this chapter will review only something of what we know about audiences.

The study of audiences intersects the study of messages. In fact, when dealing with these two areas, communication research tends to swing between two poles: powerful messages and powerful audiences. Currently, the research outlook suggests an interaction between the two, with audiences exerting some control over messages (White, 1994). To give at least an introductory sense of how communication researchers understand audiences and conceptualize how audiences understand messages, I will first review some of the materials from the perspective of powerful messages and then look at things from the perspective of powerful audiences, noting cognitive, behavioral, and emotional effects of the media. I will conclude by posing

some models for understanding audiences, seeing how these might address questions of translation.

Powerful Messages

A focus on the power of media messages entered communication research early on. Most people now know the story of the “powerful effects” research tradition. Beginning from a theory of mass society in the 1920s, scholars conceptualized the audience in this way:

Messages could be sent to every person to be received and understood more or less uniformly. Presumably, such messages would appeal to emotions and sentiments and sway the thinking or actions of each recipient in much the same way. Thus, the mass society concept yielded a theory of mass communication effects in which the media were seen as powerful, and their effects both uniform and direct among the members. (Lowery & DeFleur, 1983, p. 23)

Anecdotal evidence, particularly from advertising, fueled this theory. For example, a young William Paley left his family’s cigar business to direct CBS after seeing sales skyrocket in his native Philadelphia when he placed radio ads on local stations.

The powerful messages/powerful effects pole of communication audience research contains several theoretical strands that still appear in later years. As implied above, the theory sees audiences as aggregates rather than as individuals. The theory further tends to regard audiences as passive recipients of messages and focuses on what Thomas Lindlof has termed “presented meaning” (1988, p. 84). In addition, while not denying their cognitive or emotional effects, it directs attention primarily to the behavioral effects of messages. Finally, the powerful messages construct builds on what James Carey (1989) has described as a “transport model” of communication in which the whole communication process is geared to delivering messages from sources to receivers.

Mass society theory increased the likelihood that communication researchers would think of audiences as aggregates. Survey research, whether for academic purposes or for agencies, reported data in terms of population segments; with a population as large as that of the United States, a market share could refer to millions of people. Communication research and marketing research soon became accustomed to charting the program preferences, voting patterns, buying habits, and other behaviors of social blocks. Improved sampling techniques led companies like the Gallup and Nielsen organizations to predict national trends in voting or viewing from relatively small groups of people. How audiences specifically understood messages did not matter as much as how audiences acted—or as much as how far the message reached. The prevailing assumption held that if the message was sent and the audience was exposed to it, it would have the intended effect.

In general this tradition regards audiences as passive. They understand messages primarily by receiving the messages. In its strong form, such a view becomes the “hypodermic needle” or “bullet theory” of communication, in which a message is shot into an audience. “Communication was seen as a magic bullet that transferred ideas or feelings or knowledge or motivations almost automatically from one mind to another” (Schramm, 1971, p. 8). This theory held particular strength in the war years:

At that time, the audience was typically thought of as a sitting target; if a communicator could hit it, he would affect it. This became especially frightening because of the reach of the new mass media. The unsophisticated viewpoint was that if a person could be reached by the insidious forces of propaganda carried by the mighty power of the mass media, he could be changed and converted and controlled. (p. 8)

No one holds this strong view of the passive audience today; by the late 1940s some scholars demonstrated audience resistance to messages (Cantril, 1940). Why, they asked, did only some radio listeners of Orson Welles’s 1938 War of the Worlds broadcast panic? Why did some believe the program and others switch channels? Hadley Cantril and his associates concluded that audiences do not passively accept everything broadcast by the mass media but bring various resources to their listening or viewing. Some compared information from station to station; some simply resisted the suggested plot, being naturally skeptical; others closely attended to the internal references of the broadcast.

This last group highlights the ability of audiences to evaluate the presented meaning of a program. Here, the nature of programming itself offers some clues to how audiences understand. “Presented meaning” forms the message intended by program creators; many regard it as a fairly straightforward idea, though some question whether meaning should ever be objectified and treated as an artifact (Lindlof, 1988, p. 84). Whatever the status of that debate, the powerful messages research pole accepts meaning as a given and as something that can be presented more or less powerfully through rhetorical forms. In evaluating the concept of message power, both Roland Barthes (1970/1975) and Umberto Eco (1979) have argued that texts can constrain or encourage readers. We can apply these ideas to radio and television programming by treating that programming as a “text.” A “closed text” (Eco) or a “readerly text” (Barthes) falls close to the pole of powerful messages because it allows only one meaning. John Fiske spells this out:

The concepts of open and closed texts are useful, particularly when we ally them with the notion of a struggle for meaning. We can then characterize the television text as a site of struggle between the dominant ideology working to produce a closed text by closing off the opportunities it offers for resistive readings, and the diversity of audiences who, if they are to make the text popular, are constantly working to open it up to their readings.

Barthes's (1970/1975) categorization of texts into the readerly and the writerly has some similarities with Eco's into the closed and open. A readerly text is one that approximates to what MacCabe calls a "classic realist text," that is, one which "reads" easily, does not foreground its own nature as discourse, and appears to promote a singular meaning which is not that of the text, but of the real. (1987, p. 94)

Closed texts act to limit the interpretive action of their readers/listeners/viewers and steer their understanding and behavior in specific directions.

Strong theories of presented meaning or closed texts also appear in film study and, from that origin, have influenced thinking about audience understanding. Auteur theory stresses the role of the director in constructing messages; for such a theory to have any validity, the audience must be able to perceive the presented meaning of the director and accept it at face value. A different branch of film theory, arising in the British publication *Screen* in the 1970s, proposes that "realism" positioned audiences in ways that allowed them no room for any negotiated meaning. The cinematic "real" was so obvious and beyond question that audiences could only accept the meaning. Shaun Moores terms this the "textual determinism of screen theory" and goes on to note that "It appeared...as though the subject is always-already successfully interpellated, or positioned, by the text" (1993, p. 15). If the program/text can position the audience to perceive it in its own preferred way—from one given perspective—then the writer or director has succeeded in conveying a presented meaning.

Another form of the "presented meaning" construct that favors message content over audience understanding shows up in supporting roles in a number of other media theories. One, which stresses the potential of the message to arrange or present a world or worldview, posits an ordering or structuring role for the message strong enough to determine meaning. Donald Roberts describes it this way:

We can conceive of messages as providing prestructured information—information organized such that certain relationships and associations are salient (and often such that others are not) in the hope that a receiver's interpretation of those prestructurings will influence his image of the environment, hence his behavior. (1971, p. 362)

Lindlof analyzes the same phenomenon, noting that audience members seldom consciously avert to it:

This perspective posits at least one level of meaning that is systematically organized "beneath" a more overt and conventionally acceptable level. These deeper logics operate at psychological or ideological levels and may motivate behavior in ways that serve the interests of content designers. Moreover, this type of meaning is often thought to exert its intended effects with greatest efficacy if persons approach a media encounter assuming a conventional or transparent meaning. (1988, p. 85)

In both views the message gains power from its role in describing the world and thus offering the audience a shortcut in its attempt to understand. This view of the powerful role of presented meaning is assumed in the theory of agenda setting, which argues that the news media set the public agenda or “tell us what to think about.” By reporting certain issues and stories, they shape the public mind and influence political debate, for example. These media then become what Klaus Jensen has termed “institutions-to-think-with.” In other words, the “media institutions...serve to bracket reality and place it on a public agenda” (1991, p. 21). In this the audience passively accepts the picture of the world it sees.

The presented meaning and passive audience constructs also enter in as assumptions in George Gerbner’s various cultivation studies. Concerned with the effects of violence, Gerbner and his colleagues argue that depictions of violence do not directly cause aggression in viewers but do affect how people perceive the world. Frank Biocca (1988, p. 56) has culled some representative statements from cultivation theory:

Gerbner [Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli] (1986) write: People are born into a symbolic environment with television as its mainstream.... Television viewing is both a shaper and stable part of certain lifestyles and outlooks. It links the individual to a larger if synthetic world, a world of television’s own making.... The content shapes and promotes...dominates their sources of information...continued exposure to its messages is likely to reiterate, confirm, and nourish (i.e., cultivate) their values and perspectives. (pp. 23-24.)

Gerbner and his colleagues have shown that heavy television viewers are more likely to think that the television world accurately represents the external world than do light viewers, that violence is more common than it truly is in their cities, that television values reflect majority values, and so forth. In all of this the audience understanding (or basis for judgment) is shaped by the message content and construction.

A final area in which the strong message construct appears is in studies of learning from the media. Most agree that the mass media can succeed in teaching, but direct learning depends somewhat on audience activity. However, message effects show their strength in indirect teaching—when people don’t expect to be learning—much as Gerbner and his colleagues have argued. Studies conducted as early as the 1920s indicated that mass media images influenced children’s play and adult clothing fashions (Lowery & DeFleur, 1983, pp. 47-49).

The powerful messages/powerful effects pole of communication research has conceptualized the audience as relatively passive consumers of messages that influence their behavior and understanding in predictable ways. In this scenario, originators of messages need to take care with message construction and with message saturation. Audience understanding will follow more or less automatically. (See Figure 1)

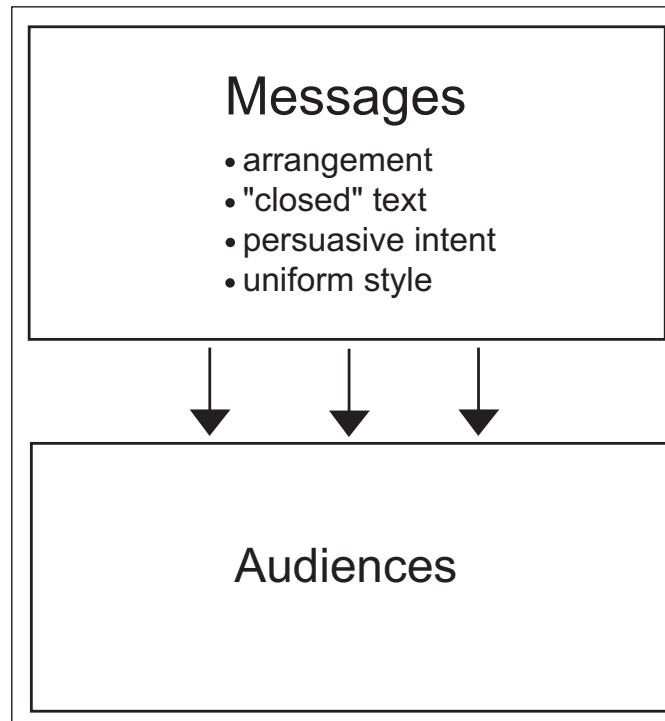


Figure 1

Active Audiences

The second pole of audience research examines audiences more closely, placing a great deal of emphasis on what people do with messages. Researchers have credited audiences with more and more power. According to Robert White, "During the 1970s, the study of media audiences moved from an emphasis on media effects to a focus on how audiences select media programs....Since the mid 1980s there has been yet another move toward an analysis of how audiences actively construct the meaning of media" (1994, p. 3). This latter swing has moved communication research more firmly to the camp of powerful audiences.

The notion of audience activity towards media messages encompasses several different approaches. Some originally appeared as limitations to the powerful effects/powerful messages construct, noting that different audiences react to messages in different ways. Another approach goes under the generic name of "uses and gratifications" research, examining how audience members use particular media in order to gratify personal needs. A third approach examines how audiences construct meaning from their media experi-

ences. Finally, another looks at what audience members do with media “texts”—how they extend those texts into other areas of their lives.

Limitations on Media Power

The idea that audiences differ in their response to messages is not new. As noted above, Cantril and his colleagues began exploring the causes of differential media effects shortly after 1938. Without crediting specific audience activity, Hastorf & Cantril (1954) chronicle how supporters of different teams viewed a football game differently. What people bring to their viewing (for example, attitudes, emotional involvement, and prejudice) determines the audience’s interpretation: A “good hit” for one viewer is rough play for another. The ultimate but indirect conclusion of their study is that a mass audience does not exist. Individuals do different things with media messages. In this early work Cantril’s group approached their conclusion from the perspective of the individual, particularly examining psychological variables.

While some early scholars, notably Herta Hertzog (1944), investigated people’s motivations in using programming (or the needs fulfilled by different programs), audience research did not focus closely on audience activity until the 1970s. Uses and gratifications research led to an ongoing effort to classify exactly how audiences utilize the media. As opposed to Cantril’s psychological work, uses and gratifications research has its foundation in functionalism, an approach that combines demographic and psychological characteristics. The assumption in this research is “that the member of the audience is not a passive but rather an active part of the mass communication process. Such active participants seek content selectively, commensurate with their needs and interests” (Lowery & DeFleur, 1983, p. 374). The audience’s understanding arises from the specific uses to which they put the media, for example, information, relaxation, and social contact.

Other theoretical constructs of the active audience also find a place in communication research. In a review of these, Biocca arranges active audience studies into five groups. First, audience activity is defined as selectivity. Audience members select which programming they will listen to or view; in addition, some theories also include selective perception and selective retention. Activities here do not have audience members doing much more than making an initial choice. For example, one might ignore advertising completely. Second, audience activity is defined as utilitarianism. Here the audience member uses the media much as a “self-interested consumer” and is active insofar as making rational choices to satisfy conscious needs. For example, one might view advertising for information regarding a purchase or one might view the ads purely for entertainment. Third, audience activity is defined as intentionality. This activity is primarily cognitive and refers to the schemas and structures that individuals use to make sense of media content; as such, it shows individual personality and motivational

traits. For example, one might view advertising with suspicion, even when it offers needed product information. Fourth, audience activity is defined as involvement. Researchers in this part of the tradition look to affective arousal or para-social interactions in which the audience members “interact” with mass media characters. For example, one might identify with a particular character in an advertisement or on a show. Finally, audience activity is defined as imperviousness to influence. This definition refers to a kind of negative activity in which the audience members resist the influence of the mass media. The audience is active in choosing not to believe a message or in choosing not to buy a product (Biocca, 1988, pp. 53-54).

Uses and Gratifications

The uses and gratifications approach solidly established the idea of an active audience, demonstrating how the audience members understood and used the media. As a theoretical grounding, this approach allowed researchers to explain both why media messages did not always work and how audiences resisted categorization as an undifferentiated mass. The approach indicates that audience understanding hinges on audience members’ needs and decisions to fulfill those needs.

Researchers, particularly those whom Biocca would class as examining the intentionality aspect of audience activity, have developed some fairly sophisticated theoretical ideas about how audiences actually understand messages. Collins (1981) and Mandler (1984) represent a group that describes mental functioning in terms of schemas that audience members use to construct meaning from the stream of images, words, music, text, and experiences that come to them. Hastie defines a schema as “an abstract, general structure that establishes relations between specific events or entities” (1981, p. 41). Such schemas allow the audience to make pragmatic sense of the message fairly rapidly by integrating it into their own mental categories.

Carey (1989) proposed a parallel theoretical move to the uses and gratifications model by suggesting a distinction between transportation and ritual models of communication. The former focus on moving a message through a communication system while the latter look to the role that communication plays in people’s lives. The ritual model of communication considers what audience members do with communication—at the role television plays in family life, for example. James Lull’s extensive television viewing studies (1980, 1988) confirm the distinction and extend the ritual use of television to both structural and relational acts:

Under the category of the structural, [Lull] included the employment of the medium as an “environmental resource”—“a companion for accomplishing household chores and routines...a flow of constant background noise which moves to the foreground when individuals or groups desire”—and as a “behavioral regulator” that serves to structure domestic time, punctuating daily activities and duties. (Moore, 1993, p. 34)

In his category of relational acts, Lull includes the use of media content to facilitate interpersonal relationships by, for example, giving topics for conversation, allowing an excuse not to talk with someone, and providing common referents outside the home. In this ritual view of the media, the audience understands media products as part of their repertoire of behaviors and environmental resources, without too much concern for the intention of the message creators. The media messages merely fit into a pre-established routine of the audience members and their households.

Meaning Construction

Besides this account of how and why audiences use the mass media, significant theoretical progress has occurred in terms of how audiences understand messages. The last 15 years have seen communication researchers move away from a concentration on the presented meaning of a text/program to a concern with the “constructed meaning.” Constructed meaning arises from the interaction between audience members and texts and presumes that audiences hold the balance of power:

Meaning that is person controlled is created out of an entire range of sources: the person’s ongoing needs, beliefs, and attitudes; social affiliations and reference groups; cultural memberships; language use; the resources and artifacts available in the settings of human activity. Central to constructed meaning is the idea that significance comes into being in the articulation of a specific person-medium encounter (which may occur after the media reception event that precipitates it), but only within the terms of a form of social reality. (Lindlof, 1988, p. 86)

This notion of meaning arises somewhat in reaction to earlier emphasis on the presented meaning. Analysis of audience reaction to television and film led a group in England at Birmingham University’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies to challenge the ability of powerful messages to situate audience members or to determine meaning:

The Birmingham group strongly contested Screen’s model of text-audience relations, putting an emphasis on readers as active producers of meaning and on media consumption as a site of potentially differential interpretations....While recognizing the text’s construction of subject positions, the Birmingham group pointed to readers as the possessors of cultural knowledges and competences that have been acquired in previous social experiences and which are drawn on in the act of interpretation. (Moore, 1993, p. 16)

Audience members, then, created the meaning of texts/programs based on their experience rather than on the presented meaning of the media source.

This re-thinking of audience understanding of meaning appropriated through the media has generated a great deal of scholarly effort, some of it overlapping, some of it borrowed from related disciplines, particularly semiotics and literary study. Barthes’s and Eco’s ideas of a writerly text and

an open text, respectively, provided a theoretical basis for seeing media products as open to multiple interpretations:

The writerly text...is multiple and full of contradictions, it foregrounds its own nature as discourse and resists coherence or unity. None of its codes is granted priority over others, it refuses a hierarchy of discourses. The readerly text is a closed one, the writerly text an open one. (Fiske, 1987, p. 94)

The qualities of the text allow the audience to actively construct a meaning. Rather than assign power to the message creator, this outlook shifts it to the audience members.

A number of communication scholars have tried to apply this to television narratives in particular. Working from people's responses to television news reports, Stuart Hall at Birmingham first proposed an "encoding/decoding" model in which audiences develop three kinds of meaning: the dominant code, which is the creator's preferred or "intended" meaning; the negotiated code, which recognizes the intended meaning but resists it by posing exceptions; and the oppositional reading, which contradicts the intended meaning. In the latter two, audience members assert their authority over the message by filtering it through their own experiences. For example, a news report on a labor union's strike might lead business executives to approve policing tactics while simultaneously leading workers to protest police brutality (Hall, 1980).

Fiske (1987) qualifies Hall's work and argues that audience understanding arises primarily from three forces: the nature of the text, the mode of reception, and a social determination. With open or writerly texts capable of many meanings, the audience activity takes on even greater importance. On the one hand, he claims that how audience members experience television/text influences the meaning they ascribe to it. As Lull showed, television is a domestic medium and its audiences watch with varying degrees of attention; with other household activities going on; and with constant negotiating about program choice, family authority, and even gender roles (1987, p. 72). "Television, to be popular, must not only contain meanings relevant to a wide variety of social groups, it must also be capable of being watched with different modes of attention" (p. 73).

On the other hand, Fiske notes, "Meanings are determined socially: that is, they are constructed out of the conjuncture of the text with the socially situated reader" (1987, p. 80). Social groupings position viewers/readers vis-à-vis the program/text: Thus, audience understanding flows partly from audience identity. But this undercuts the very concept of the audience:

There is no stable entity which we can isolate and identify as the media audience, no single object that is unproblematically "there" for us to observe and analyze. The plural, audiences, is preferable—denoting several groups divided by their reception of different media and genres, or by social and cultural positioning. (Moores, 1993, pp. 1-2)

Communication researchers have begun to look at the social factors that situate audiences. Among these are gender (Brown, 1994), social standing, economic value, and political or ideological beliefs (Moore, 1993). However, these positionings of the audience members do not have to remain stable. A working parent may shift viewing position from parent to worker, depending on the program. Everyone belongs to more than one audience situation. (See Figures 2 and 3)

Lindlof has recast these groupings and named them interpretive communities. Such communities guide readers/viewers/listeners to ranges of meaning possible in the program/text. "The individual's actual reception of mediated content represents a social performance mandated by the role structure operative in the reception setting" (1988, p. 82). From this perspective it is the community that guides meaning by giving its members a set of interpretive tools or genres with which to decode media content. "The criterial features of any interpretive community consist in the modes, meaning constructs, and frequency of its internal messaging in using media technologies and content" (p. 82). Audience understanding happens as a function of group identity.

Audience Activity with the Text

Another part of audience understanding arises after the encounter with the text. Audiences also understand pragmatically. What do audiences do with the program/text? Newcomb & Hirsch (1984) offer the concept of cultural forums in their description of the media. In these forums, meanings,

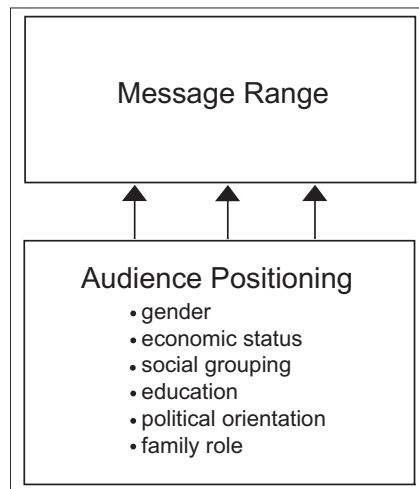


Figure 2

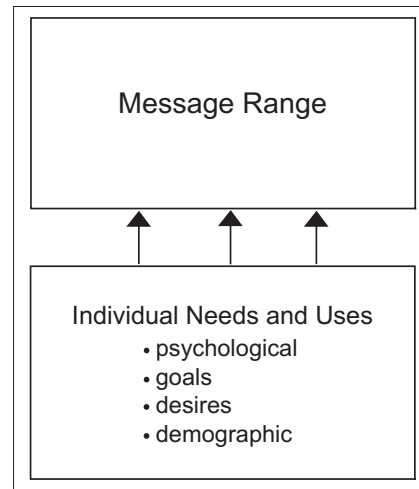


Figure 3

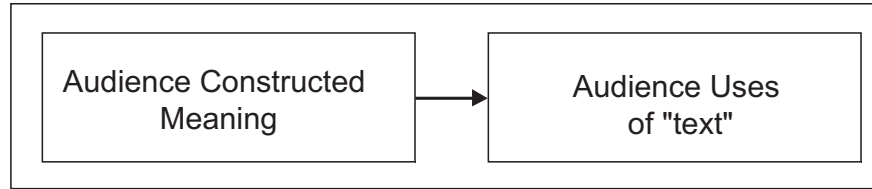


Figure 4

audiences, and media institutions interact with each other to raise questions and constitute new social groups. The measure of audience understanding becomes what audiences do with the program/text. For example, they might treat a television program as a metaphorical place (or forum) to listen to alternative views of society.

Audience members also act to construct their own discourse from the meanings they make of media content. For example, television involves audiences because its narratives find a place in popular culture, which is still largely an oral culture. In other words, television works as a part of the culture because people talk about it and incorporate it and its stories into their conversations (Fiske, 1987, p. 105).

In a similar way, some audience members extend the discourse of the mass media by finishing its stories and adding their own. These audiences are among the most powerful because they do not allow the media producers to control either their programs/texts or the circulation of those programs/texts. Jenkins sees this group epitomized in fan clubs. He “proposes an alternative conception of fans as readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture” (1992, p. 23). Fans understand programs/texts by commandeering them for their own purposes, as “Star Trek” fans do when they write their own scripts based on the series characters. Understanding only begins with the interaction with or viewing of a program. What matters is what the audience does after their viewing. (See Figure 4)

The powerful audience pole of communication research sees audience members as actively choosing what to do with communication products. They select programs. They resist some cognitive, affective, and behavioral appeals and succumb to others. They experience communication products from defined (but sometimes shifting) positions. They determine the meaning that they attach to the program/text. And they re-make the program/text as they wish through conversation, interaction, and even play.

Ways to Understand Audiences

The two poles of communication audience research represent extreme positions. Undoubtedly, neither the message nor the audience holds all power when it comes to understanding mass media products. The two poles do clearly illustrate, though, the forces that act upon messages and people. They also show that many of the constructs used in communication study link it to other interpretive disciplines. While the issues raised by audience interaction with programs/texts may be new to communication, they are not completely new for the humanities. This appears especially in three areas: interpretation, interpretive communities, and the nature of texts.

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/1991) has explicated a hermeneutical model that proposes that meaning results from a “fusion of horizons” of the text and the reader. Both bring something to the meaning, which comes to its fullness only in the interaction of the two. Among other things, that interaction includes a kind of back and forth rhythm between text and reader; no interpretation is final, though some interpretations may be privileged and gain wide acceptance. This model seems particularly apt for describing what happens when audiences receive mass media products: Meaning results from the actions of both. Programs/texts do carry meaning, meanings which their creators did in fact intend. Audiences for their part do actively negotiate meaning, based on, for example, their positioning, their prior experience, and their needs. Where two audiences may perceive and receive a program/text differently, they still have some common areas. Unlike Lewis Carroll’s Humpty-Dumpty, one cannot make texts mean whatever one wishes them to mean—there still remains both a text and a community of interpretation to put a brake on unlimited interpretation and to reject unwarranted claims.

Communities of interpretation offer another means to understand audience understanding of programs/texts. Audience positioning occurs because people bring particular shared tools and common mental constructs. They learn some of these explicitly in schools; they appropriate others from families and social organizations. And they assimilate concepts of relationship, value, and utility from their own community organization and structure. All these things affect their dealing with mass media products; at the same time mass media products become part of the mix of community organization and structure. Brian Stock describes a similar experience in what he calls “textual communities” in his exploration of the rise of literacy in the Middle Ages (1983, pp. 88-240).

Stock notes that textual communities, which first arose among dissenters, “demonstrated a parallel use of texts, both to structure the internal behavior of the groups’ members and to provide solidarity against the outside world” (p. 90). The groups’ reliance on texts (or on those who could read the texts) conditioned the ways they conceptualized their world. The text re-

arranged the patterns of the world for members of these communities: The familiar was a text; the outside world, beyond the text. The text also changed the group. Because all the members knew the text, even if they could not read it, they shared a common base:

As a consequence, interaction by word of mouth could take place as a superstructure of an agreed meaning, the textual foundation of behavior having been entirely internalized. With shared assumptions, the members were free to discuss, to debate, or to disagree on other matters, to engage in personal interpretations of the Bible or to some degree in individualized meditation and worship. (p. 91)

The medieval textual communities allowed a certain freedom vis-à-vis the defining tradition and fostered an individuality within the bounds of the group. Much the same thing happens within the interpretive communities shaped by the mass media. The common outlook fosters going beyond the program/text while making the program/text absolutely indispensable to the group.

The text itself must have some essential characteristics if it will function for communities of interpretation. Briefly, it must be interpretable. Eco's and Barthes's distinctions between open (writerly) and closed (readerly) texts point out that people can create texts with greater or lesser scope for audience interpretive activity. In addition, texts interact with one another and this too makes them suited for interpretation. Fiske adapts the literary construct of intertextuality to define this aspect of the television text:

The theory of intertextuality proposes that any one text is necessarily read in relationship to others and that a range of textual knowledges is brought to bear upon it.... Intertextual knowledges pre-orient the reader to exploit television's polysemy by activating the text in certain ways, that is, by making some meanings rather than others. (1987, p. 108)

Like the audience members' communities, the mass media's programs/texts prepare them for interpretation.

From these things we can construct a model for understanding how audiences understand mass media products. (See Figure 5) First, media messages and media audiences interact. Second, audience members' communities position them to construct certain meanings over others, within the range of possible meanings of the text. Third, media messages are constructed to define a range of meaning; the narrower the range, the more powerful the message and the more directed the audience's understanding. Fourth, audience members also respond to their own needs and goals; even as members of an interpretive community, they have individual motivations and needs, some of which will drive their understanding of the mass media through selectivity, involvement, or resistance. These audience members extend and clarify their understanding through incorporating the media message in daily talk. Thus they give new life (and new form) to the message

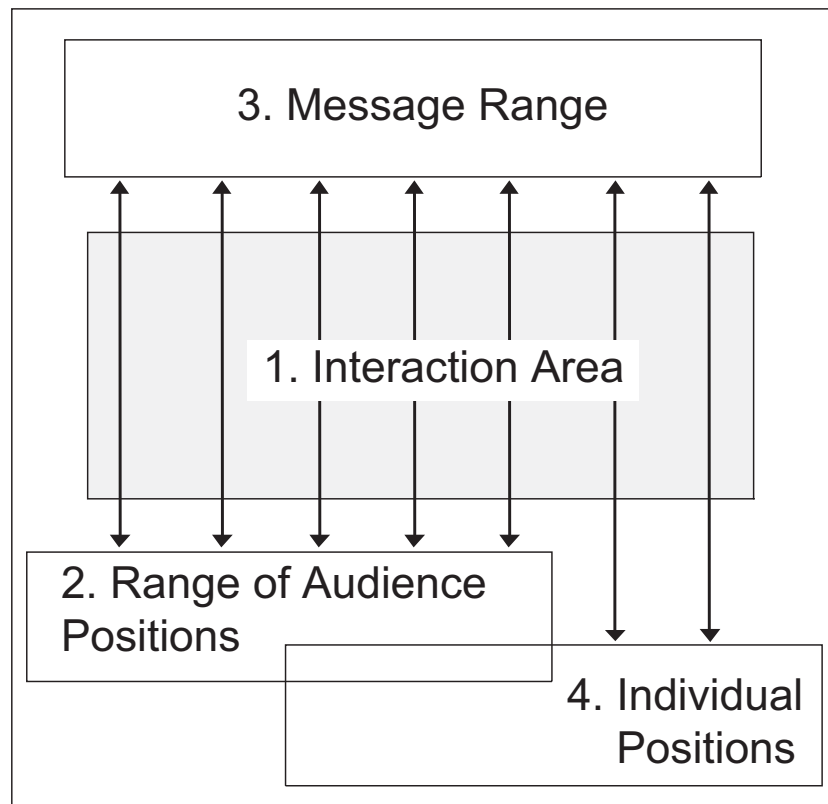


Figure 5: Zone of Understanding

by transposing it into their oral culture. These factors combine to create a “zone of understanding” in which the message and audience come together.

One final factor, which is well known but little understood, also influences audience understanding: technology. The ubiquity of communication technology leads us to take it for granted even as it promotes the ubiquity of media messages. Technology does make a difference, apart from any concern with media and message (McLuhan, 1962) or with media and thought (Ong, 1982):

It is also necessary for us to ask about the ways in which that technology serves to “mediate” between private and public worlds—connecting domestic spaces with spheres of information and entertainment that stretch well beyond the confines of family and locality. Communication technologies have...played an important part in the symbolic construction of “home”—whilst simultaneously providing household members with an opportunity to “travel” elsewhere, and to imagine themselves as

members of wider cultural communities at a national or transnational level. (Moore, 1993, p. 70)

At minimum, technology adds to audience understanding by extending the audience's world and helping to shape that world. People become part of interpretive communities and approach media content in specific ways because of communication technologies.

Understanding technology demands a separate essay; let me just note here that the technology makes possible most of what this essay describes. In this way it directly influences audience understanding. Its indirect influence extends to habits of thought, modes of expression, use of time, and household arrangement.

Towards Multimedia Translation

Given what we know about audience understanding, what should multimedia translators do? Using the model sketched out above, I will suggest six possibilities.

- Admit the power of the audience in shaping its own understanding. Because audiences are active, the translator/communicator should accept that and build on it, both in text construction and in text arrangement (through use of multiple media, for example).
- Know the psychological and social needs of the audience. Audiences both choose and respond to communication in terms of their needs—and those needs differ from one person to another and among groups. Understanding the audience helps the communicator position the message within the desired zone of interpretation.
- Foster closed texts for greater control of the message, but foster open ones for greater participation by audience members. The translator's goal will affect how one constructs the message. If fidelity to a text ranks high, then the translation should produce a closed text; if one desires to have the audience members appropriate the text, then the translation should induce audience activity.
- Direct the uses of the product so that audience members let the translation become part of their oral culture. It should become something talked about and shared with friends. In this, the translators should merely facilitate how the Scriptures normally become a part of the culture of any people.
- Create a community of interpretation. By incorporating the Scriptural text into the oral life of the people, the translators take the first step toward connecting their readers/viewers/listeners with a community of interpretation. The Christian community itself and all of its local churches form a community of interpretation. For a multi-

media translation to be successful, it should connect back to that community.

- Take advantage of technology. The multimedia translation project has already taken advantage of technology, but it should go beyond its initial use of the technology and take advantage of the ways in which communication technology shapes and interacts with its audience. The project teams should look again at how technology affects the audience and adjust the project to take full advantage of this.

Finally, as a kind of postscript, let me also suggest that multimedia translation look at models of understanding drawn from their own studies. For example, relevance theory addresses how people make sense of complex verbal messages. Gutt explains:

Communication works by inference. The communicator produces a stimulus from which the addressee can infer the communicator's informative intention. This process succeeds as well as it does because of a universal psychological principle—the principle of relevance. The addressee can assume that the first interpretation consistent with this principle is the one intended by the communicator:

One of the entailments of this principle is that, in order to be communicable, the informative intention must yield adequate contextual effects for the addressees. (1992, p. 35)

Gutt's summary indicates that people attempt to make sense of messages as they receive them, according to their experience and background—an active audience principle. Relevance theory also echoes the notions of a community of interpretation and the balance between open and closed texts.

The many areas of overlap in audience studies and between audience study and other approaches to understanding should remind us that, when it comes to understanding audience understanding, we need as many tools as we can manage.



Paul A. Soukup, S.J., has explored the connections between communication and theology since 1982. His publications include *Communication and Theology* (1983); *Christian Communication: A Bibliographical Survey* (1989), and *Mass Media and the Moral Imagination* with Philip J. Rossi (1994). In addition, he and Thomas J. Farrell have edited three volumes of the collected works of Walter J. Ong, SJ, *Faith and Contexts* (1992-1995). This later work has led him to examine more closely how orality-literacy studies can contribute to an understanding of theological expression. A graduate of the University of Texas at Austin (Ph.D., 1985), Soukup teaches in the Communication Department at Santa Clara University.
