

## CHAPTER 10

## The Limits of Power: Resisting Dominant Meanings

In the meaning-making process there are many pressures for closure, that is attempts to direct, narrow or close meaning in favour of one or other sectional interest. Hegemony-theorists propose that ruling groups have an advantage when it comes to closing meanings because they have the necessary power and influence to steer meaning-production towards their preferred understandings of the world. Some closures flow from unconscious beliefs and behaviours (such as journalistic practices), while other closures are deliberate and calculated interventions (such as the public relation-izing of war). It is clear there will be some people and interest groups *trying* to exercise control over meaning-production. However, communication involves a highly complex set of interactivities and so is *not* a process that *can* simply be controlled by those wishing to do so. At most, one might argue that ‘distortions’, ‘restrictions’ and ‘closures’ occur within the *production* processes, and that some possibilities exist to ‘shift’ and ‘channel’ meanings within the complexity and messiness of the communication process. But understanding what possibilities exist for ‘control’ also requires grappling with communicative messiness and unpredictability which necessarily limits the possibility for controlling the final outcome of any meaning-making process. Understanding what these ‘limits’ are is as important for those wanting to manipulate and restrict meaning-flows as it is for those interested in resisting discourse closure.

The key factor militating against discourse closure is the fact that meaning-making involves a process of sharing and engagement between

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a communicator and someone who has to receive, read and use the meaning being imparted. Active human subjectivity has to engage with any message before any meaning is actually made. Therefore, the receiver of a message is as much part of the meaning-making process as the person encoding the message. This leaves open the possibility that the meaning intended by the encoder may never actually be realized because the message can be interpreted, ignored, mis-read, deliberately reconstructed or even resisted.

### Interpretation and meaning-making

Stuart Hall provides a useful perspective on the role interpretation plays within the overall process of constructing meaning. Hall (1980) says that encoding a message is merely the first step in the process of creating meaning, and the process is not completed until the message is decoded. Hall argues that all messages have encoded into them a 'preferred' meaning (i.e. the meaning the hegemonically-dominant would prefer the decoders of the message to accept), but preferred meanings will not always be successfully conveyed. Instead, Hall (1980) proposes three potential decodings. The first occurs when decoders simply and unproblematically accept and internalize the 'preferred' meaning(s) as intended by the encoder. A second possibility is that decoders, operating within 'an oppositional code', reject the message. A third possibility is a 'negotiated' meaning that results when decoders accept some elements of the 'preferred' meaning, but reject other aspects. Hall's encoding/decoding model effectively reads the notion of hegemonic struggle into the communicative process.

Hall's encoding/decoding article generated a new genre of 'audience' and 'reading' studies when it became fashionable within cultural studies to emphasize the role of the reader (as an active meaning-maker) and to devalue simultaneously the analysis of media *production*, or the idea that the media might have the power to manipulate audiences. In its extreme form, this new genre of cultural studies views the active reader as something of a 'resistance hero' – the simple act of watching television in one's own home could be romanticized into a act of 'resistance' against hegemonic meanings. Fiske, for example, saw 'disruptive reading' (1987: 72) as a form of resistance and equated the act of watching a particular television programme as representing housewives resisting patriarchy (Fiske, 1987: 72). Naturally, this idea of 'resistance' appealed to an

OECD-based, left-leaning intelligentsia with nothing to 'struggle against' in the comfort of their middle-class suburbs.

The first of the post-Hall encoding/decoding studies was Morley's (1980) *Nationwide* study. Morley examined how trade union officials, apprentices and black students read texts. He discovered that people decoded messages in ways that did not correlate to their social position; as active readers, Morley's subjects often decoded messages in unexpected ways. In part, this unexpectedness flowed from Morley's anticipation that audiences would read messages according to their class positions. Instead, *Nationwide* discovered that readers decode as individuals, not collectively as a 'class'. For cultural studies practitioners, because of their left-wing assumptions, this result was something of a trauma. The trauma precipitated a *de facto* shift away from studying 'audiences' as a collective towards studying 'readers' as individuals, as well as a devaluation of communication-production studies and the associated notion of 'ideology'. Hence, after Morley, reader-responses and ethnographic audience analyses became a more popular focus within cultural studies. The result was a series of studies of how readers encounter media texts (Hobson, 1982; Ang, 1985; Tulloch & Moran, 1986; and Buckingham, 1987). This genre of work strangely paralleled the sort of highly intellectualized text-based readings previously associated with literary practical criticism, except that these new ethnographic audience studies focused on media texts and leaned politically to the left. This genre of work also overlapped with aspects of uses-and-gratifications theory, an approach which has examined the 'uses' to which people put media products (Blumler & Katz, 1974).

Hall's encoding/decoding article and Morley's study had major impacts within Anglo communication studies, generating a recognition that if meaning-making was to be understood, it was necessary to look beyond the practices and discourses of professional communicators, beyond production, beyond the media and beyond notions like ideology and hegemony. Effectively, Hall and Morley generated a recognition that there was another element involved in the emergence of meaning, namely, *interpretation*, and interpretation grew from the subjectivity of individual recipients. In the (Anglo) cultural studies tradition, 'interpretation studies' came to focus on how audiences read and used media texts and, in the process, played a role in the emergence of popular cultural forms. Another equally important (European) tradition of interpretation studies is reception theory (Holub, 1984). However, strangely, the work of reception theorists like Jaus and Iser, which focus on the role of the

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'perceiving subject' as the maker of meaning, has not been engaged by those in Anglo communication studies who are interested in the nature of 'interpretation' and 'active readership'.

Certainly, the focus on 'audiences', 'active readers' and 'interpretation' generates a new set of insights about communication. A key insight is that meaning is slippery – meanings cannot be 'fixed' by a communicator because the meanings that are produced (encoded) can be interpreted (decoded) in a multitude of different ways. Effectively all texts are necessarily 'unfinished' when they are encoded. As Fiske says, texts appear to contain many possible meanings at the point of encoding (1987: 85). Fiske's suggestion is that texts can be read in many different ways because they are polysemic and so are always open to readers 'negotiating' their own particularistic understanding out of the multiple meanings available within a text. This view of communication dovetails neatly with constructivist logic which contends that all human understanding is 'constructed'. But, whereas audience studies and reception theory emphasize the role of 'readers' in constructing understanding, this author views over-reliance on the reception-end of the communication process to be as flawed as an over-emphasis on the production dimension. Rather, a holistic understanding of meaning-making requires focusing on the co-role that both encoders and decoders play in co-constructing meaning. This process of co-construction involves multiple players, embedded in ever-shifting contextual arrangements within which there are simultaneous pressures for 'opening' and 'closing' reading (and coding) possibilities. Essentially, 'active reading' (decoding) is no more of a privileged site for 'open' meaning-making than are production (encoding) sites. Active reading is no guaranteed panacea against the pressures for closing or narrowing meaning possibilities. Readers are, after all, able to decode in ways that 'close' and 'narrow' meanings. Hence, just as lying and manipulation can be 'distorting' features of communicative coding, so misinterpretation and misunderstanding can be 'distorting' features of decoding.

### **'Closure' of the reading process**

The idea that 'active reading' necessarily works against discourse closure is naïve. This highly romanticized view of audiences appears to have been premised upon a left-wing need to find 'sources of resistance'. As commendable as it may be to seek out mechanisms for resisting

hegemonic closures and power-elite manipulations, it is simply overly optimistic to assume that decoders (audiences/readers) are necessarily able to 'see through' communicative partiality and manipulation. The reading process itself can suffer from 'closures'.

Decoding/reading can be just as biased, partial and skewed as encoding/media production. Readers, after all, engage in any decoding process with preconceived pictures in their heads. The process of reading/decoding never starts from 'ground zero' because readers and audiences bring to the task of interpretation their existing beliefs, frames of reference, biases and prejudices. Except for young babies, humans have acquired language, which means they have internalized a particular set of signs and codes. As Whorf (1971) has noted, once we have internalized the signs and codes of our language community, our perception of the world will thereafter be 'guided' by the linguistic 'possibilities' (and 'limitations') of that language community. Therefore we 'see' (and 'think about') that which we have 'words' to express, and fail to see that for which we have no coding apparatus. For example, because Eskimos have numerous words to describe 'snow', they will instantly see multiple varieties, while those with a more limited repertoire of words for 'snow' will not actually see the differences. So our language communities (coding systems) set parameters on what we 'look for' and hence 'see'. This in turn influences the repertoire of pictures already stored in our heads when we encounter the next text that we need to decode. So, from a Whorfian perspective, our perception is always 'guided' by our coding system and so is always 'partial'. There will be phenomena that we 'fail to grasp' because we are unable to 'perceive' the coding possibilities. On the other hand, there will be phenomena we are inclined to 'foreground' in our perceptions because the language system to which we belong has socialized us to pay particular attention to some signs and codes. For example, Englishmen foreground 'class' and Southern Africans foreground 'race' in their coding systems.

This Whorfian view can be read in connection with the idea of intertextuality which proposes that any one text is necessarily read in relationship to other texts (Fiske, 1987: 108). When we encounter a text we necessarily see it in the light of images, ideas, agendas and biases which we have already acquired from previously processed texts. In a sense, intertextuality means that readers are, to some extent, always 'pre-coded'. For example, when an intellectual encounters a new book, s/he reads it in the light of prejudices acquired from previously read books and other texts. Similarly, new television images of Mandela will be read in the light

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of prejudices acquired from previously encountered televisual images of (and other texts concerning) Mandela and South Africa. Effectively, we are always 'primed' and 'guided' by previously internalized texts. As we internalize texts, we effectively build up a repertoire of codes that provide the framework for navigating our way through future textual encounters. In the contemporary world, television has become an especially important source of 'priming texts' that influence how we (intertextually) encounter the world. To borrow from Tuchman (1978), television can be seen to act as a 'window on the world', giving us access to some images, but excluding others that the cameras do not focus on. Hence, television texts are 'windows' with enormous agenda-setting powers. Over time, the ideas, themes and images that are selectively placed on to our agenda by television become an important set of texts (or repertoire of images) that we presumably use for future intertextual reading acts.

It is also important to note that once an individual has internalized a text and accepted that text's particular interpretation, s/he develops a 'commitment' to that particular frame of reference. Thereafter, if new texts are encountered that contradict the perspective already internalized, tension and cognitive dissonance can result. Not surprisingly, many social psychologists argue people pay 'selective attention' to incoming information and engage in 'avoidance behaviours' to steer clear of information that will cause them cognitive dissonance because it contradicts what they already believe (see Abelson et al., 1968). Should people fail to avoid texts causing cognitive dissonance, they can engage in a process of 'rationalizing away' the new information in order to preserve the integrity of the originally internalized text. So it cannot be automatically assumed that 'active readers' are 'competent' decoders (although neither should it be assumed that competent reading is an impossibility).

Our competence as readers can (in certain circumstances and contexts) also be influenced by a tendency to conform to group pressures. Social pressures (perceived or real) can make readers/decoders as complicit as encoders/producers in generating discourse closures. Sherif's (1936, 1937) work on the phenomenon of the 'autokinetic light effect' is instructive in this regard. A person sitting in a darkened room who is shown a small stationary point of light will eventually imagine the light is moving. In group situations, Sherif discovered, nearly all feel compelled to believe they are seeing it move the same distance. Similarly, political communicators have long known how to use the 'bandwagon' (or 'reverse bandwagon') effect to win support. For example, a person will be led to

believe that ‘everyone’ in the group to which s/he belongs is acting in a certain way. Rather than be the ‘odd one out’ individuals will often follow the majority and ‘jump on the bandwagon’ (Lee & Lee, 1939: 105). In essence, the pressures towards ‘groupthink’ (Janis, 1972) can be a powerful influence on how texts are read. A sense of belongingness, group solidarity and the desire to maintain existing relationships can significantly impact on how people (allow themselves to) interpret incoming stimuli, and so undermine their competence as readers. All of these factors influence not only the readers of media texts but also the producers of these texts, who have to read their environment in order to report on it.

The above discussion lends some credence to the notion that readers are simply ‘positioned’ by their coding systems (i.e. ‘the prison-house of language’ idea). The alternative perspective (articulated by Fiske, for example) is that readers are active agents. This tension between ‘closed’ and ‘active’ decoding (and closed and active encoding) is necessarily a core issue within communication studies and has consequently been an important tension throughout this book. Ultimately, if this book is to proffer any perspective on this issue, it is that instead of focusing on a binary opposition (i.e. ‘active/open’ encoding/decoding versus ‘positioned/closed’ encoding/decoding), it is more helpful to explore the notions of ‘qualified closure’ and ‘qualified openness’ and the complex relationship(s) between these.

### **Resisting versus promoting closure**

Communication takes place within a matrix of shifting power relationships. This process is enmeshed with ongoing struggles to establish, maintain and/or resist power relationships. This can be at the level of power relationships within a small group or work situation or can be at the macro socio-political level. For the purposes of this book it is the macro (political communication) level that is of interest. It is in this regard that Hall’s encoding/decoding notion becomes valuable. Using a combination of Gramsci and Hall, it is possible to conceptualize of the following communication ‘positions’:

- Encoders with power (those inside ruling hegemonies).
- Encoders seeking to build power (those seeking to establish and consolidate new hegemonies).
- Encoders seeking to overthrow existing power relationships (those

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opposing hegemonic orders whether these be established, new or in decline).

- Encoders ambivalent about the outcome of power struggles.
- Decoders aligned to a ruling hegemony.
- Decoders opposed to a ruling hegemony (which may or may not imply an alignment to counter-hegemonic groups).
- Decoders ambivalent about a ruling hegemony.
- Decoders ambivalent about counter-hegemonic groupings (and/or hegemonic struggles).

These ‘positions’ will generate a range of possible interrelationships between encoders and decoders, encoders and encoders, and decoders and decoders. Some of these ‘positions’ involve players attempting to close and narrow discourse (in the direction of their own ‘preferred’ understandings), while other ‘positions’ involve a ‘necessary’ oppositional stance, that is a resistance to discourse closure. Because of the communicative complexity mentioned above, those seeking to bring about closure are never likely to meet with total success. However, this does not rule out the possibility that discourse closures can be (temporarily) achieved in certain contexts and with regard to certain groups and individuals. Good communicators are able to analyse contexts, individuals and groups in order to ascertain the likelihood (or otherwise) of achieving their communicative goals.

What is clear is that ‘resistance’ to meanings generated by encoders is always a *possibility* because individuals can think autonomously and read ‘actively’ – and so achieve Halls’ oppositional or negotiated decodings. But it is a *possibility* that is not always *realized*. In political terms, the likelihood of oppositional readings seems to be greater when hegemonic orders are either new or old. This appears to occur because ruling groups in newly established hegemonies are still learning how to create and promote discourses appropriate to their needs. Further, in newly established hegemonies, decoders with oppositional readings are likely to be more numerous because the new hegemony has not as yet had sufficient time to promote and widely diffuse its preferred discourses. On the other hand, when hegemonies are old and crumbling, more communicative spaces will be available for dissent than when hegemonic orders still retain the capacity to ‘police’ the production and circulation of discourses in their spheres of influence. Hegemonies are struggled over and pass through periods of greater or lesser closedness, and through periods when hegemonic operatives display greater or lesser discursive

competencies. As a result, the availability of 'spaces' for 'active readers' to engage in oppositional (or even negotiated) readings is contextually-bound. Revolutionary periods witness a growth in the 'spaces' for, and so a growth in, the 'availability' of oppositional readings, whereas periods of great conservative stability coincide with the ability of ruling groups successfully to promote their 'preferred readings' and/or to narrow the 'spaces' for 'oppositional readings'. Hence, the ability to engage in (and promote) a particular oppositional reading will vary according to the context.

The contextual parameters that open (facilitate) or close discursive possibilities are set by a range of variables, including the power relationships between the encoders and decoders at a particular point in time, the communication technologies available at that historical juncture and the competence of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic encoders and decoders.

### **Are we witnessing a new set of communicative struggles?**

Many now agree that the end of the twentieth century witnessed the birth of a new form of socio-economic organization, which, in this book, has been termed global network capitalism. New information technologies (facilitating the growth of instantaneous global communication) are widely regarded as having been significantly implicated in the emergence of this socio-economic formation. From the point of view of conceptualizing the role of communication in building a new political order this raises a number of interesting questions:

- Are we witnessing the birth of a new hegemonic order (being built by global network capitalists)? And is a New World Order premised upon an era of global network capitalism now a *fait accompli*?
- Can we as yet discern the shape of global network capitalism's preferred or dominant discourses?
- If we are in a transition from one form of hegemony to another, does this equate to the opening up of a new 'revolutionary era' which will see the emergence of 'discursive churning', 'discursive openness' and 'discursive conflict' (until such time as the new hegemonic order firmly beds itself down)?
- Do the new information technologies necessarily create new 'spaces'?

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for communicative dialogue or debate? For example, is the notion of using the World Wide Web to build a new 'public sphere' a feasible proposition? (Ironically, as with the old bourgeois public sphere, a World Wide Web public sphere would similarly be confined to an elite – in this case the 'information rich'.)

- Alternatively, is the notion of a global public sphere a new mythology? Could it be that our societies have simply grown too big for us to even entertain the pretence that citizens can any longer participate in social dialogues within which they can exercise real influence? Maybe population size and socio-economic complexity now preclude anything but pseudo-participation. And so now all we are left with is power-elite decision-making and elite manipulation of communication flows. (In this regard, 'networked communication' has the advantage – for the networker elites – of being able to generate a greater sense of 'belonging' and 'participation' than does 'mass communication'.)
- What possibilities can be discerned for opposing the preferred discourses of global network capitalism?
- If a new hegemonic order does congeal, what will the shape of the new counter-hegemonic groupings, the new 'oppositional discourses' and the new sites of struggle be? (To what extent might the 1999 Seattle anti-WTO demonstrations provide an indication of the shape of a new counter-hegemonic set of discourses?)
- Will people growing up surrounded by information technologies be more likely to be highly 'information literate'? Will they become critical active decoders/readers of the discourses flowing through the proliferating range of channels available? Or will they become more susceptible to 'manipulative encoders' because of the highly 'informational' nature of their environment?

Presumably, the struggle between the forces for discursive closure and openness will remain a feature of human existence for the foreseeable future. But how the hegemonic and communicative struggles of the future play themselves out remains to be seen.