

MAPPING THE MEANING MAKING PROCESS: USING EXPERIENTIAL MAPS IN AUDIENCE RECEPTION STUDIES

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I. Introduction

Ethnomethodology provides media researchers with a way of studying the codes and unconscious belief systems that shape and inform how audiences construct meaning from media texts. The ethnographic model in audience reception studies focuses not only on the moment of textual interpretation but also on the contextualisation of that moment and establishes the audience as active participants in the communication process, acknowledging that audiences are plural and divergent in their decodings and interpretations of media texts and in their constructions of meaning. David Morley's (1980) study of the *Nationwide* audience was a watershed in terms of shifting audience research towards empirical enquiry. Since then, the developing public knowledge strand in audience studies has attempted to catalogue the interpretations of media texts constructed by different groups of audiences, but has often fallen short of an explanatory analysis of how structural factors interact in the decoding process. Morley sought to chart a kind of 'cultural map' of the audience that would build on Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model. Yet the concept of mapping has not been further developed in the field of audience research. Mapping as a research tool is well established in several fields. Concept mapping, for example, has been used in psychological and behavioural investigations (see for example McKenna and Richardson, 2003). Social investigations in psychogeography use experiential maps based on such notions as landmark, district, edge or boundary to reveal the cultural and political determinations in people's everyday itineraries. This paper presents how an investigation into the interpretation and circulation of media messages about terrorism uses experiential mapping to establish the role of cultural

frameworks, discourses and ideologies in how different audiences decode media texts. While Morley sought to map the audience in terms of social and cultural variables that impact on the meaning making process, this study attempts to chart the decoding process at the micro-level and relate this to the macro-level social, political and cultural context in which audience and text interact.

The use of experiential mapping in the field of audience reception studies offers a way of charting the decoding process of a media text and the communication of meanings between audience members to identify strategic points in the meaning making process. As such, it offers a way for audience researchers to analyse:

- Strategic points in the meaning making process;
- The range of discourses and their bearing on the meaning making process;
- Intersectionalities of cultural codes and competencies and their influence in the meaning making process; and
- The influence of opinion leaders on the meaning making process.

The research upon which this paper is based follows the prevailing trends in audience research and analyses two distinct sets of contextual factors that impact on the production of meaning using two distinct modes of analysis. These are the internal structures of media messages which can be analysed through semiotics and the social contexts of the audience which can be analysed sociologically. The main task of this research undertaking is a sociological investigation of how Western Australian audiences from different socio-cultural backgrounds interpret and circulate media messages about terrorism with a view to establishing the role of cultural frameworks, discourses and ideologies in the interpretation of media messages and the construction of meaning.

Ten focus groups were conducted to gather initial information that would then inform the development of individual indepth interviews. The focus groups were separately held with both

Muslim and non- Muslim Western Australians to provide the researcher with an indication of how different audiences construct media messages about terrorism and the terrorist threat to Australia. Thus a basic premise of the research is that the religious backgrounds of audiences is a main factor in determining how individual audience members decode media messages on terrorism and the theoretical positionings- preferred, negotiated or oppositional of different audiences.

II. Audience Ethnography

The ethnographic approach to media audiences, traditionally associated with the anthropological domain, is intrinsically suited to this kind of audience research because of its fundamental emphasis on context and the understanding of actions as they occur within the dynamics of contemporary culture. In its purest form, ethnographic research involves the first hand observation of subjects in a cultural context. In the field of media studies, the conception of ethnography as a qualitative research method recognises the relationship between audiences and media texts as one which is mediated by the audience's daily involvement with a range of social institutions, discourses and ideologies (Morley, 1992).

The ethnographic approach to media audiences is not without its criticisms. Turner (1990) criticises Morley's methodology in the *Nationwide* study for being artificial in the screening of *Nationwide* to create discussion. Morley's (1992) response is that ethnography is itself characterised by the generation and construction of specific occasions controlled by the researcher. While this requires a level of self-awareness by the researcher in the analysis of data, it by no means nullifies the research findings. Ang (1991) argues that research itself is limited as a discursive action produced through historically and culturally specific discursive encounters between researcher and subject. As such, research is a construct, a kind of imagined reality that can only ever be an interpretation of reality and never reality itself. These limitations

of ethnography as a method in media research signal areas of caution for the researcher but do not necessarily negate the viability of empirical research or the argument based on the analysis of empirically acquired data. While these cautions may be more salient in a pure ethnographic setting which involves participant observation, they are also applicable to this study that does not employ the observation of particular behaviour. In attempting to chart the meaning making process, this study relies on the stories of the participants as imparted to the researcher. In accordance with the ethnographic model, participants are interviewed in their homes surrounded by their usual news and information sources. They are asked to recount their experiences of how they learnt about global media events, how they felt, what they thought and who they spoke to about the threat of terrorism. The interview technique used is itself limited by the cultural and linguistic frames of reference which participants in the research have at their disposal to verbalize and communicate their stories. Morley (1992) raises the question of the validity of participants' accounts of behaviour versus observed behaviour and argues that participant observation is much more problematic and open to speculation than the interview method (p. 181). He supports the interview method because it affords the researcher an insight not only into the "respondents' conscious opinions and statements" but also the linguistic and cultural frames of reference through which respondents articulate their own understandings of their behaviours (p. 181). By Morley's argument, one can infer that the cultural and linguistic frames of reference that are evident in the respondents' articulations are themselves open to interpretation and analysis by the researcher and as such offer an opportunity to add depth to the research process not accessible through participant observation. The challenge of qualitative media research is succinctly summarised by Geertz, "what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to..." (cited in Morley, 1992 p. 182). The challenge to audience ethnography is to analyse these

constructions to determine their significance and importance within a broader framework, what Livingstone (1998) refers to as the “so what?” question for media research.

III. The Broader Framework

The discourse on terrorism in the popular Australian media is a developing discourse intrinsically tied to the political and social context in which the media, as a social institution, operates. As such, a study of how audiences are decoding the media messages in this discourse requires a different approach to that adopted by Morley in his study of the *Nationwide* audience. While Morley’s application of the encoding/ decoding model presents an empirical quantum leap in terms of the study of audiences as active agents in the meaning making process, it fails to take into account some aspects of the broader framework and contexts within which audiences interact with the media including the political and social climate, the historical experiences of the audience that influence the range of discourses that the audience bring into a reading of media texts, inter group relationships and the influence of opinion leaders including political leaders.

The political climate in Australia in which the discourse on terrorism in the media has developed is one in which Australia is consistently portrayed as being at threat of an imminent terrorist attack. In a series of media releases since September 11, the Prime Minister has consistently referred to Australia as being at imminent threat of a terrorist attack. In June 2002 the Prime Minister released the first of what was to be many counter-terrorism packages and stated “The horrifying events in the United States last September drew Australia, and the rest of the world, into a new and largely unpredictable security environment” (Attorney-General’s Department, 2002). Later that same year, after the Bali bombings in October, the Prime Minister announced further counter-terrorism arrangements, reiterated his previous statements about security and added that the Bali bombings were a personal attack on Australia, “The

terrorist attacks on the United States last year revealed that we are now operating in a new security environment. The Bali bombings tragically brought that directly and personally home to Australians” (Australian Government, 2002). In a media release on the strengthening of the counter terrorism laws, the Prime Minister stated, “while we have been fortunate not to suffer a terrorist attack on our soil, Australians have been the victims of attack overseas and Australia itself has been a target for terrorists in the past”. In reference to the need for legislative reform, the Prime Minister referred specifically to the circumstances of the London terror attacks, “The terrorist attacks on the London transport system in July have raised new issues for Australia and highlighted the need for further amendments to our laws” (Australian Government, 2005). The government’s apparent insistence that Australia as at threat of an imminent terrorist is captured in the National Security Information Campaign, “Let’s Look Out For Australia”, first launched in December 2002. In September 2004, a new phase of the campaign was launched entitled “Help Protect Australia from Terrorism”. The campaign includes television, press, transit and outdoor advertising urging Australians to report “possible signs of terrorism to the National Security Hotline”. The use of both visual and print media ensures that the campaign is highly visible to Australians and communicates a message that Australians need to be consistently vigilant about the threat of terrorism.

In December 2005, Australia witnessed what is arguably one of the most violent episodes in recent history as hoards of youths converged on Sydney’s Cronulla beach in a mass demonstration of patriotism and nationalistic pride. The youths were rallied together via text messages sent to hundreds of mobile phones “This Sunday every Fucking Aussie in the shire, get down to North Cronulla to help Leb and wog bashing day...”. The rally was preceded by an episode in which a number of young men ‘of middle-eastern appearance’ had attacked and bashed two lifeguards on Cronulla beach. The life guards were off duty and had exchanged insults with the young men. An altercation ensued in which the two life guards were bashed. In

an interview televised on the ABC's 4 Corners Program, three young men involved in the Cronulla riots related three different versions of the instigating incident. One stated that he believed the life guards were bashed in retaliation for asking a group of Lebanese youth to stop harassing young girls on the beach. Another stated that he heard that a lifeguard had saved a Muslim woman and was bashed in retaliation for touching her in the line of duty. Yet another stated that the lifeguards were on duty and were set upon for no apparent reason. The three men interviewed in this program also expressed perceptions of Australian Muslims including a perception, or what may be termed a misperception, that it is acceptable under Muslim law to rape women, concern that Australia could become an Islamic state and an overarching anxiety over the threat of terrorism. The case of the Cronulla riots illuminates a number of factors relating specifically to the circulation of information and opinion as an extraneous factor that may impact on how audiences read media texts not obvious in the encoding/decoding model and not previously considered in Morley's study, but that nevertheless are intrinsic to the construction of media messages on the discourse of terrorism and fear. Firstly, the terrorism discourse in Australia has evolved into a debate on the Islamic presence in Australia portrayed as a clash of cultural values. This discourse has been assisted by comments from Federal politicians. In an address to the Sydney Institute on 23 February 2006 on the topic of Australian Citizenship, the Federal Treasurer, Peter Costello, addressing the audience on Australia's democratic tradition stated that those who oppose democratic legislature and do not abide by Australia's laws should be refused Australian citizenship. He immediately followed this comment with a reference to terrorists and those who support them and then proceeded single out Muslims as those who have "strong objections" to the Australian values of "loyalty, democracy, tolerance, the rule of law..." The conflation of the term Muslim and terrorist in the political rhetoric on Australian values warrants further examination with particular reference to the impact of this rhetoric in the terrorism discourse. Secondly, the Cronulla riots highlighted

existing tensions between Australian Muslims of Lebanese background and the wider community in Sydney's South-West. These social tensions contribute to and sustain a level of anxiety and fear both within the Australian Muslim communities and the wider communities that may impact on how audiences read media texts. Thirdly, the Cronulla riots became subsumed into the discourse on terrorism as people attempted to search for a reason for heightened levels of tension and aggression that caused the youth in Cronulla to riot against the presence of Lebanese Muslims in the Shire as the following excerpt from 4 Corners demonstrates:

LUKE: ...the monster's just going to go somewhere else. It'll rear its head somewhere else. There's always going to be that threat. And I think that paranoia will become part of society forever. Like, as far as I can see. And I don't- I think that's here to stay.

LIZ JACKSON: And what threat? What is the threat you're talking about?

LUKE: Terrorism, you know. It's terrorism.

An examination of how media audiences construct media texts relating to terrorism needs to take into account this social and political climate within which media messages are encoded and decoded and which may impact on how audiences read media texts. In other words, the process of encoding and decoding does not happen in isolation of a number of contextual factors including the prevailing social, cultural and political framework within which media institutions and media audiences interact.

IV. Applying the encoding/decoding model to the terrorism discourse

Morley (1980) applied the encoding/decoding model to a study of a particular text, the *Nationwide* news program, and the range of encoded messages and underlying meanings of that programme. Given the range of factors identified in the evolution of the discourse on terrorism in Australia, it is worthwhile questioning whether the encoding/decoding model may be applied to media texts that draw on and contribute to an overarching discourse of terrorism that is evolving and changing and that has been built around a global media event, the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the ensuing 'war on terror'? To do this a model is needed that not only relates to the theoretical positionings of reader and text but that also recognises and takes into account the fluidity of the discursive realities that have developed around the terrorism discourse. The underlying theoretical assumption here is that the emerging terrorism discourse in the popular media contains embedded messages about the threat of terrorism that invite preferred readings. The relationship between reader and text determines whether the messages are decoded from a preferred, negotiated or oppositional position. This relationship is influenced by a number of extraneous factors, including those implicated in Morley's (1980) study but also the contextual factors expressed as social tensions such as those implicated in the Cronulla riots. Thus, the construction of meaning is not only influenced by the socio-cultural characteristics of the audience but also by inter personal group structures and dynamics. This allows for an examination of how the circulation of media messages about terrorism may influence the construction of meaning from texts as the opinions of influentials become added to the range of discourses at the readers' disposal in the decoding process.

The model also presents the decoding process as a cycle rather than as a unitary linear process. This recognises that audiences may construct meaning from the terrorism discourse differently according to different contextual factors or to the introduction of new or different discourses

and influences during the decoding process, but also according to the broader cultural, political or economic framework within which the terrorism discourse has evolved. While Morley's study focussed on mapping the audience in terms of socio-cultural background, it did not in any depth examine the political, social and cultural interaction of the text itself, other than with regard to the content and underlying assumptions of the text.

The model used in this study posits that decoding is in fact a dynamic and fluid process that continues beyond the 'determinate' moment at which a message is decoded and is subsumed into the social practices of the audience. In this model meaning is structured not in terms of a determinate moment that yields a message (encoding) or another determinant moment where that message is received and processed (decoding). Rather, meaning is continuously structured and restructured through the complex and changing interrelationship between receiver, the cultural codes and discourses at the disposal of audiences and intra-group relationships. Such a conceptualisation of how meaning is constructed through an ongoing and fluid process of text-audience interaction illuminates strategic points in the communication process. These strategic points are not one but a series of determinate moments where messages are decoded, subsumed into the range of cultural codes and discourses available to the audience that are then implicated in the decoding of other messages and are then also subsumed into the cultural codes of the audience. These strategic points can then be mapped in such a way that allows the researcher to chart the meaning making process.

V. Mapping the meaning making process

In December 2002 every household in Australia received a terrorism information pack entitled "be alert not alarmed" from the Federal Government. The pack contained advice and information on what Australians should do in the event of a terrorist attack. The launch of the "be alert, not alarmed" campaign drew mixed responses from Australians. Participants in the

research focus groups were asked to comment on their reactions to receiving the terrorism pack in their letter boxes. One respondent, who for the purpose of this article shall be known as Mary, described the following experience:

At first I didn't read it, but my eldest son he read it and he followed the instructions and he got himself stocks and everything at the front door and he rung me and the second son said, "look, we'd better do the same and we'd better have a plan of where we're going to go". So we decided we'd all go to the youngest son in Northam and I was asked to ring Mark. Well I rang Mark he laughed himself silly and he said "Oh Mum, I thought you had more sense than that". And he said, "OK if it happens can you let me know when you're coming because we can pack up and go. We've got a three bedroom house and not enough room". So you know I ended up being rational, sort of thinking this is all quite stupid, and I threw Johnny Howard's pack in the bin and I got all this stuff that I'd bought and we ate it!

There are several points in Mary's story that can be considered strategic points that influenced the meaning making process. Her first reaction to receiving the terrorism pack was not to read it. Further investigation with this respondent revealed her approach to media texts relating to terrorism prior to receiving the terrorism pack:

The information that I've been getting is mainly from the mass media and current affair programmes. I didn't really take much notice of anything until John Howard sent out his, I can't remember what it was called, the terrorism pack, what to do if we were under attack, and I sort of thought 'Wow maybe we are more

at risk then I think we are'. So it sort of, for a while it freaked me out a little bit, but looking at it rationally, I think we are probably more at risk from bird 'flu than we are from terrorism. I've got it more in perspective now.

Receiving the terrorism pack is a strategic point in Mary's construction of meaning about terrorism and fear because it represents a point at which this particular respondent began to take a more preferred reading of the political and media discourse on the threat. The overwhelming response from participants in the focus groups is that the media's message with regard to terrorism is that Australia is at threat of an imminent attack and that Australians should be afraid. This is supported by a number of textual analyses of media texts on terrorism.

The second strategic point described by Mary is the point at which she talks to her first son and in which she begins to take the terrorism pack seriously-she reads it, stock piles food and devises with her family a plan of what they will do in the event of a terrorist attack. At this point the respondent is engaging with the political and media discourse on terrorism from a preferred position.

The next strategic point is when Mary talks to her son Mark who tells her that she is being irrational in taking the terrorist threat seriously. At this point, she moves from a preferred position to an oppositional position- she threw the pack in the bin and ate the food she had stockpiled.

This point raises the influence of opinion leaders and group relationships as an influencing factor in how audiences decode media texts relating to terrorism. One respondent identified her father as an opinion leader:

And if I want to talk to someone I talk to my dad because he, he has a way of rationalising all of it and he'll kind of go 'when I was younger and this was happening or.....' and that sort of thing,

and he's quite cynical as well towards other things, so he's a good person to bounce off.

Also implicated in Mary's account is how her own experiences as a child during the war influenced her reactions to the discourse on terrorism demonstrated by the respondents assessment of how her own reaction to the "war on terror" was based on these experiences.

But it's real time messaging, and this term 'War on Terror' and I was born during the war. My memories are being in an air raid shelter and my mother falling apart and being hysterical. So I started to take on my mother's behaviour, and then after speaking to my youngest son, I took on the stoic British view of, well it's over now and we'll get up in the morning and go to work. But you just get on with life, so I was sort of torn in two with reactions.

These factors: inter and intra group relations, the influence of opinion leaders such as Mary's sons and the historical experiences of audience members are not considered in Morley's study of the *Nationwide* audience. They are however factors that, like those mentioned earlier in this paper in relation to the prevailing social context in which the terrorism discourse is being constructed, that influence how audiences read media texts on terrorism and the terrorist threat to Australia.

While the research is still in progress, the focus groups have provided an insight into how, what the researcher has termed experiential mapping, can be used as a research methodology for charting the meaning making process. The individual interviews will explore further how the strategic points highlighted in the focus groups discussions are implicated in how audiences construct meaning from media texts. The use of experiential maps allows the researcher to

describe the micro process through which meaning is constructed and relate this to the macro-level framework that takes into account the social and political context in which audiences and media operate and in which they interact. In this way the research will build on Morley's attempt to catalogue the interpretations of media texts constructed by different groups of audiences, by offering an explanatory analysis of how structural factors interact in the decoding process. While Morley sought to chart a kind of 'cultural map' of the audience that would build on Hall's encoding/decoding model, this research seeks to chart an 'experiential map' of the audience which takes into account the socio-cultural backgrounds of the audience as well as the macro-level political and social context in which the media operate and in which the audience interacts with the media.

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