CHAPTER 27

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Cultural Studies

of Stuart Hall

Stuart Hall is a Jamaican-born emeritus professor of sociology at the Open University in the U.K. In previous pages you read about the ideas of the Frankfurt School sociologists, Stanley Deetz, and Roland Barthes (see Chapters 4, 21, and 26). Hall joins this group of critical scholars who attack "mainstream" communication research that is empirical, quantitative, and narrowly focused on discovering cause-and-effect relationships. In particular, Hall doubts social scientists' ability to find useful answers to important questions about media influence. He rejects the "body counts" of survey research, which are "consistently translating matters that have to do with signification, meaning, language, and symbolization into crude behavioral indicators." For Hall, the question is not what percentage of Americans supported the post 9/11 U.S. War on Terror. Rather, the crucial issue is how the media created unified support for the invasion of Iraq among a public that had previously been split on the issue.

CULTURAL STUDIES VERSUS MEDIA STUDIES: AN IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE

Hall believes the mass media maintain the dominance of those already in positions of power. Broadcast and print outlets serve the Warren Buffetts, Michael Bloombergs, and Bill Gateses of this world. Conversely, the media exploit the poor and powerless. Hall charges that the field of communication continues to be "stubbornly sociologically innocent." He is "deeply suspicious of and hostile to empirical work that has no ideas because that simply means that it does not know the ideas it has."[1] Noncritical researchers represent their work as pure science with no presuppositions, but every media theory by its very nature has ideological content. Hall defines *ideologies* as "the mental frameworks—the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the representation—which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works."[2] Most of us are unaware of our ideologies and the tremendous impact they can have on our lives.

Ideology
The mental frameworks different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of the way society works.

As for mainstream mass communication research in the United States, Hall believes that it serves the myth of *democratic pluralism*—the pretense that society is held together by common norms, including equal opportunity, respect for

diversity, one person–one vote, individual rights, and rule of law. The usual finding that media messages have little effect celebrates the political claim that democracy works. Such research claims that the American dream has been empirically verified, and science beckons developing countries to become "fully paid-up members of the consensus club."

Democratic pluralism
The myth that society is held together by common norms such as equal opportunity, respect for diversity, one person–one vote, individual rights, and rule of law.

Hall believes that typical research on individual voting behavior, brand loyalty, or response to dramatic violence fails to uncover the struggle for power that the media mask. He thinks it's a mistake to treat communication as a separate academic discipline (a view that may or may not endear him to your instructor). Academic isolation tends to separate messages from the culture they inhabit:

> All the repetition and incantation of the sanitized term *information*, with its cleansing cybernetic properties, cannot wash away or obliterate the fundamentally dirty, semiotic, semantic, discursive character of the media in their cultural dimensions.[3]

Therefore, Hall refers to his work as *cultural studies* rather than *media studies*, and in the 1970s he directed the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham in the U.K. Under Hall, the staff and graduate students at CCCS sought to articulate their perceptions of the cultural struggle between the haves and the have-nots. Hall uses the term *articulate* in the dual sense of *speaking out* on oppression and *linking* that subjugation with the communication media because they provide the terrain where meaning is shaped. He says he doesn't seek to be a "ventriloquist" for the masses, but he does desire to "win some space" where their voices can be heard.[4] The effort to jar people loose from their entrenched power positions often requires harsh words, but a "cozy chat among consenting scholars" won't dissolve the ideology that is the glue binding together most communication study.

Articulate
The process of speaking out on oppression and linking that subjugation with media representations; the work of cultural studies.

Since one of Hall's stated aims is to unmask the power imbalances within society, he says the cultural studies approach is valid if it "deconstructs" the current structure of a media research establishment that fails to deal with ideology. Just as Deetz wants to give a meaningful voice to stakeholders affected by corporate decisions (see Chapter 21), Hall wants to liberate people from an unknowing acquiescence to the dominant ideology of the culture. Obviously, *critical theory* and *cultural studies* are close relatives. However, Hall places less emphasis on rationality and more emphasis on resistance. As far as he's concerned, the truth of cultural studies is established by its ability to raise our consciousness of the media's role in preserving the status quo.

Cultural studies
A neo-Marxist critique that sets forth the position that mass media manufacture consent for dominant ideologies.

Hall is suspicious of any cultural analysis that ignores power relationships. That's because he believes the purpose of theory and research is to empower people who live on the margins of society, people who have little say in the direction of their lives and who are scrambling to survive. He takes the epitaph on Karl Marx' tombstone as a mission statement for cultural studies: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however is to *change* it."

HEGEMONY: MARXISM WITHOUT GUARANTEES

Stuart Hall owes an intellectual debt to Karl Marx. Of course, for many students in the West, the word *Marxist* conjures up images of failed Communist states, repressive dictators, and the Tiananmen Square massacre. Marxism, however,

is at root a theory of economics and power. At the risk of oversimplifying, the Marxist golden rule suggests that *he who has the gold, rules*. Because workers lack capital or the means of production, they must sell their labor to live. Therefore, in a capitalistic society, people who own the means of production gain more wealth by extracting labor from workers, who get no extra benefit from the wealth created by their work. So the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Great wealth comes to the privileged few who did little to create it. According to Marx, as the gap between the managerial class and the working class grows ever larger, desperate workers will overthrow the owners and create a classless society.

Economic determinism
The belief that human behavior and relationships are ultimately caused by differences in financial resources and the disparity in power that those gaps create.

Although Hall is strongly influenced by Marxist thought, he doesn't subscribe to the hard-line brand of *economic determinism* that sees all economic, political, and social relationships as ultimately based on money. He thinks that's an oversimplification. As a Jamaican person of color who immigrated to England as a young adult, Hall found that his physical appearance was often as important as his economic class in the way people reacted to him. Nor is he convinced that the masses will inevitably revolt against those who control the means of production in a capitalistic society. Instead, he adopts a Marxism without guarantees. He realizes that his theory is not pure, but he'd rather be "right but not rigorous" than "rigorous but wrong."[5]

Hegemony
The subtle sway of society's haves over its have-nots.

Hall draws upon Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci's concept of *hegemony* to explain why the revolution Marx predicted hasn't occurred in any industrial society.[6] On the international scene, *hegemony* usually refers to the preponderant influence or domination of one nation over another. The word is little used by Americans, perhaps because it describes how many countries see the United States. In a specific cultural context, Hall employs the term to describe the subtle sway of society's *haves* over its *have-nots*. He emphasizes that media hegemony is not a conscious plot, it's not overtly coercive, and its effects are not total. The broadcast and print media present a variety of ideas, but then they tend to prop up the status quo by privileging the already-accepted interpretation of reality. The result is that the role of mass media turns out to be *production of consent* rather than a *reflection of consensus* that already exists.

Recall that Stan Deetz uses the term *consent* to describe how workers unwittingly accomplish the desires of management in the faulty attempt to fulfill their own interests. They are complicit in their own victimization (see Chapter 21). In the same way, Hall believes that the consent-making function of the mass media is to convince readers and viewers that they share the same interests as those who hold the reins of power. Because the media's hegemonic influence has been relatively successful, it's played an important role in maintaining worker unrest at the level of moaning and groaning rather than escalating into revolutionary fervor.

MAKING MEANING THROUGH DISCOURSE

In his book *Representation*, Hall states that the primary function of discourse is to *make meaning*. Many students of communication would agree that words and other signs contain no intrinsic meaning. A catchy way of stating this reality is "Words don't mean; people mean." But Hall asks us to push further and ask, *Where do people get their meanings?* After all, humans don't come equipped with

ready-made meanings, either. Hall's answer is that they learn what signs mean through discourse—through communication and culture:

> Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings—"the giving and taking of meaning"—between the members of a society or group. To say that two people belong to the same culture is to say that they interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world in ways that will be understood by each other.[7]

To illustrate that meaning comes through discourse, Hall asks his readers how they know that a red light means *stop* and a green light means *go*. The answer is that someone, many years ago, told them so. The process is the same when we consider signs such as a picture of Osama bin Laden, the golden arches, or the word *terrorist*. But it is not enough that we simply recognize that meaning is created in discourse. We must also examine the *sources* of that discourse, especially the originators or "speakers" of it.

Discourse
Frameworks of interpretation.

Hall was struck by French philosopher Michel Foucault's extensive study of mental illness, sexuality, and criminality in different historical eras. Foucault concentrated on what people were saying, what people were *not* saying, and *who* got to say it. As you might suspect, he discovered that throughout history, not everyone in society had an equal voice or power. That's certainly true in America today. Undoubtedly, CNN founder Ted Turner has more discursive power than I have. But, due to the fact that I've authored a college textbook, I'm aware that I have more power to frame meaning than do many of the students who read it.

In terms of mental illness, Foucault found that the definition of what constitutes insanity and what to do about it have changed dramatically over time.[8] People with power drew arbitrary lines between the normal and the abnormal, and these distinctions became *discursive formations* that had real, physical effects on those deemed to belong to each group.[9] Over time, these unquestioned and seemingly natural ways of interpreting the world became ideologies, which then perpetuated themselves through further discourse. The right to make meaning can literally be the power to make others crazy.

Discursive formation
The process by which unquestioned and seemingly natural ways of interpreting the world become ideologies.

CORPORATE CONTROL OF MASS COMMUNICATION

Hall has worked to move the study of communication away from the compartmentalized areas reflected in the organization of this text: relationship development, influence, media effects, and so on. He believes we should be studying the unifying *atmosphere* in which they all occur and from which they emanate—human culture. Consistent with Marxist theory, he also insists that communication scholarship should examine power relations and social structures. For Hall, stripping the study of communication away from the cultural context in which it is found and ignoring the realities of unequal power distribution in society have weakened our field and made it less theoretically relevant.

Hall and scholars who follow his lead wish to place the academic spotlight directly on the ways media representations of culture reproduce social inequalities and keep the average person more or less powerless to do anything but operate within a corporatized, commodified world. At least within the United States, the vast majority of information we receive is produced and distributed by corporations. If your family-room television is tuned to CNN, and the table

beneath it holds a copy of *Sports Illustrated* (*SI*), your home is a virtual advertisement for a media conglomerate. Time Warner owns *SI*, CNN, and most likely the cable company that brings the signal to your house. And if you switch channels to HBO to watch a flick produced by the largest Hollywood studio, you'll get a double dose of meanings produced and sponsored by Time Warner.

As long as subscription rates don't go up, what difference does monopoly ownership make? Hall would answer that corporate control of such influential information sources prevents many stories from being told. Consider the plight of the vast majority of the people in Africa. Except for your knowledge of the scourge of HIV/AIDS across the continent and news of pirates hijacking ships off the coast of Somalia, that may be hard for you to do. For example, there's almost no reporting of decades of genocide in Sudan. It's not the subject of a television drama and it rarely makes the evening news. On the few occasions when the atrocities are mentioned, they are paired with the issue of who will control the country's oil reserves. That linkage squares with Hall's belief that news comes with a spin reflecting the interests of Western multinational corporations. The ultimate issue for cultural studies is not *what* information is presented but *whose* information it is.

POST–9/11 MEDIA COVERAGE: THE CHILL OF CONSTRAINT

Sometimes the dominant ideology is upheld by constraint. On the night of September 11, ABC broadcasters Peter Jennings and Ted Koppel discussed the question that was on many Americans' minds: *Why do some people hate America so much that they respond with glee at the carnage caused by terrorists?* Both commentators spoke of extended assignments in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East among people in abject poverty who had only seen images of America's wealth, power, and arrogance—much of it exported in U.S. culture industries of television, movies, fashion, and popular music. For 15 minutes, two of the country's top news analysts spoke in a personal and soul-searching way about seething frustrations among the poor in two-thirds of the world. They avoided the good-guy/bad-guy stereotyping that I had heard on other channels. This was surely not Hall's ideological discourse of constraint.

Culture industries
The producers of culture; television, radio, music, film, fashion, magazines, newspapers, etc.

It turned out to be a one-night stand. That was the only time these broadcasters suggested that American political and corporate policy might be a contributing cause of enmity. A week later CBS anchor Dan Rather appeared on the *Late Show with David Letterman* and declared something like unconditional fealty to President George W. Bush and the "War on Terror."

> But I couldn't feel stronger, David, that this is a time for us—and I'm not preaching about it—George Bush is the president. He makes the decisions, and—you know as just one American—wherever he wants me to line up, just tell me where.[10]

Two lesser-known journalists criticized Bush shortly after the attack for matters of style. One said he appeared "stiff and boyish," while the other took issue with the president's characterization of America's response to terrorism as a "crusade." But both commentators quickly apologized for their outspokenness. For the next month, *never was heard a discouraging word.*

Perhaps the most unusual patriotic appeal after the 9/11 terrorism was President Bush's equation of love of country with spending money. He suggested that this was an especially good time to buy a new car, a statement that he permitted to be used in numerous car commercials.[11] Whether it was patriotism

or zero percent financing, new car sales increased 31 percent in the first two months after the tragedy. Here again, no network news show questioned the administration's linkage of consumer purchasing and patriotism. But comedian George Carlin drew a laugh of derision from a *Tonight Show* audience when he deadpanned: "Go out and buy some jewelry and a new car. Otherwise the terrorists win."

Hall believes the mass media provide the guiding myths that shape our perception of the world and serve as important instruments of social control.[12] This seems to describe U.S. media treatment of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) as justification for invading Iraq in 2003. Although the broadcast and print media faithfully reported chief U.N. weapons inspector Hans Blix' failure to discover WMD prior to the invasion, like the Bush administration, they never questioned the existence of a chemical or nuclear threat. News stories instead dwelled on when and where WMD would be found. The media's creation of a popular consensus was so thorough that even after the 9/11 Commission concluded that Saddam Hussein had no such weapons, large segments of the population continued to believe in their existence. Only in late 2004 did media outlets begin to examine why they never questioned the government's position.

How do multiple media outlets end up speaking on a major issue with what seems to be a single voice? Given the country's shared images of airliners impaling the twin towers of the World Trade Center, the buildings' subsequent collapse, and the 95 percent approval rating of the president's response, each news editor's decision may seem an easy one. But Hall suggests that hegemonic

encoding occurs all the time, though it's not a conscious plot. A story in an op-ed piece in the *Los Angeles Times,* written by Alexander Cockburn, reflects that idea.

> When he was joining the London Times in the 1920s, my father asked his uncle, who was on the Times' board, who really formulated Times' policy. "My boy," his uncle said, "the policy of the London Times is set by a committee that never meets."[13]

EXTREME MAKEOVER: THE IDEOLOGICAL WORK OF REALITY TV

Not all of the media's ideological work is accomplished through the presentation of news. Luke Winslow, a business communication lecturer at the University of Texas at Austin, claims that the representation of ordinary people on reality TV "offers its viewer more explicit 'guidelines for living' than other television genres."[14] Specifically, he analyzes *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* to show how it reinforces the myth of the American Dream.

Since 2003, the Sunday-night show has featured the fairytale story of a down-and-out family living in a decrepit house and then having it transformed into a dream home in seven days, at no cost to them. But as Winslow notes, the weekly feel-good program hasn't "become ABC's top-rated series and the winner of back-to-back Emmy awards because it is concerned with concrete and drywall."[15] The real focus is on a deserving family that has suffered misfortune and on their restoration to a perfect life.

Although the show spotlights a different family each week, they have much in common. The producers intentionally seek out all-American families whose moral character, love for each other, and demonstrated care for others make it clear that they are worthy recipients. In the first segment of the show we meet the family and hear their story. Through his questions and comments, host Ty Pennington assures his team that these are good folks who play by the rules. In the second segment we learn that, through no fault of their own, the family has fallen on hard times made much worse by the dump they live in. Whether victims of heinous crime, survivors of a natural disaster, or those who suffer from medical problems that insurance companies refuse to cover, they've all hit rock bottom. The combination of their moral goodness and tragic circumstances convinces Ty and his viewers that these are *deserving people*—truly worthy of being chosen to get an extreme makeover or a brand new home.

The rest of the show chronicles the ingenuity and commitment of the designers, contractors, and volunteers as they frantically race against time. We learn to appreciate ABC and other major corporations that donate materials and services to make this extreme makeover possible. Meanwhile, the family has been sent away for an all-expenses-paid week of vacation. At the end of the show they are brought back in a stretch limousine to see their new home, but their view is intentionally blocked by a bus. Then Ty and the whole crew yell to the driver, "Move that bus!" When they can see their new home, family members are blown away by the total transformation. Amid tears of joy they tell Ty that it's unbelievable, miraculous, an answer to prayer. As for television viewers, they "can rest assured knowing that the moral are rightly rewarded and all is right in the world."[16]

Perhaps you've already anticipated Winslow's cultural critique of the show. He believes the real work done in *Extreme Makeover* is on the audience rather than the house. Each episode is a mini morality play that suggests wealth goes only to those who deserve it. These good people deserved a decent house and

they got it. The system works. Winslow cites Stuart Hall when he summarizes the message that's enacted every week:

> The result is a reduced and simplified ideology regarding the connection between morality and economics: who should be poor and who should not, and, more importantly, frameworks of thinking about how the social world works, what the viewers' place is in it, and what they ought to do. We not only learn who deserves to be rich, and who deserves to be poor, but also how each should be treated.[17]

Winslow's critique is typical of scholarship done under the banner of Hall's cultural studies. It takes popular culture seriously and seeks to reveal the way it typically supports the status quo. In Winslow's words, "Ultimately, a primary goal of ideological scholarship is to bring comfort to the afflicted and [to] afflict the comfortable by questioning taken-for-granted assumptions, giving voice to the voiceless, and bringing in those on the margins of society."[18]

AN OBSTINATE AUDIENCE

The fact that the media present a preferred interpretation of human events is no reason to assume that the audience will correctly "take in" the offered ideology. I once heard Robert Frost recite his famous poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." After completing the last stanza—

> These woods are lovely, dark and deep,
> But I have promises to keep,
> And miles to go before I sleep,
> And miles to go before I sleep.[19]

—the New England poet said in a crusty voice, "Some people think I'm talking about death here, but I'm not." Yet poems, like media depictions, have a life of their own. Despite his words, I have continued to interpret the verse as referring to obligations to be met before we die.

Hall holds out the possibility that the powerless may be equally obstinate by resisting the dominant ideology and translating the message in a way that's more congenial to their own interests. He outlines three decoding options:

1. *Operating inside the dominant code.* The media produce the message; the masses consume it. The *audience reading* coincides with the *preferred reading.*
2. *Applying a negotiable code.* The audience assimilates the leading ideology in general but opposes its application in specific cases.
3. *Substituting an oppositional code.* The audience sees through the establishment bias in the media presentation and mounts an organized effort to demythologize the news.

With all the channels of mass communication in the unwitting service of the dominant ideology, Hall has trouble believing that the powerless can change the system. He calls this his "pessimism of the intellect."[20] Yet he is determined to do everything he can to expose and alter the media's structuring of reality. He refers to this as his "optimism of the will." Hall has genuine respect for the ability of people to resist the dominant code. He doesn't regard the masses as cultural dupes who are easily manipulated by those who control the media, but he is unable to predict when and where resistance will spring up.

Hall cites one small victory by activists in the organized struggle to establish that black is beautiful. By insisting on the term *black* rather than *Negro* or *colored*, people of African heritage began to give dignity in the 1970s to what was once a racial slur. Jesse Jackson's call for an African American identity is a continuing effort to control the use of symbols. This is not a matter of "mere" semantics, as some would charge. Although there is nothing inherently positive or negative in any of these racial designations, the connotative difference is important because the effects are real. The ideological fight is a struggle to capture language. Hall sees those on the margins of society doing semantic battle on a media playing field that will never be quite level. In her cultural studies application log, Sharon depicts a clear winner in the linguistic struggle within the abortion debate:

> The media seems to favor those with "pro-choice" beliefs. I wish copywriters would even the debate by referring to the other side as "pro-life" rather than "anti-abortion." This would be a sign that pro-life groups are seen as reasonable, positive people. Up to this point, they haven't been able to make that label stick in the public arena. The media gives an ideological spin by the use of connotative language.

CRITIQUE: YOUR JUDGMENT WILL DEPEND ON YOUR IDEOLOGY

In his early work, Marshall McLuhan was highly critical of television. Hall accuses McLuhan of being co-opted by the media establishment in his later years. He characterizes McLuhan's final position as one of "lying back and letting the media roll over him; he celebrated the very things he had most bitterly attacked."[21] No one has ever accused Stuart Hall of selling out to the dominant ideology of Western society. Many communication scholars, however, question the wisdom of performing scholarship under an ideological banner.

Do such explicit value commitments inevitably compromise the integrity of research? Former surgeon general C. Everett Koop lamented that pro-choice researchers always conclude that abortion does no psychological harm to the mother, whereas pro-life psychologists invariably discover that abortion leaves long-term emotional scars. In like manner, the findings of the economically conservative American Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC, differ greatly from the conclusions reached at the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies under the direction of Hall. Ever since Copernicus thought the unthinkable, that the earth is not the center of the universe, truth has prospered by investigating what *is*, separately from what we think it *ought* to be. Hall seems to blur that distinction.

Although Hall is recognized as a founding figure of cultural studies, there are those who work within this fast-growing field who are critical of his leadership. While appreciating his advocacy for ethnic minorities and the poor, many women decried his relative silence on their plight as equal victims of the hegemony he railed against. Hall belatedly became an advocate for women and acquiesced to their demand for shared power at the Birmingham Center. But his now-famous description of the feminist entry into British cultural studies shows that for him the necessary change was painful and messy: "As the thief in the night, it broke in; interrupted, made an unseemly noise, seized the time, crapped on the table of cultural studies."[22]

The most often heard criticism of Hall's work is that he doesn't offer specific remedies for the problems he identifies. While it's true that he has no grand

action agenda for defusing the media's influence on behalf of the powerful elite, he has worked hard to expose racism that's reinforced by press reporting. For example, Hall served as a key member of a commission that issued an influential report in 2000 on the future of a multiethnic Britain. The following excerpt is a sample of Hall's impact on the commission's call for a change in the way ethnic groups are represented in the media.

> A study by the *Guardian* of its own coverage of Islam in a particular period in 1999 found that the adjective "Islamic" was joined with "militants" 16 times, "extremists" 15 times, "fundamentalism" eight times and "terrorism" six times; in the same period the adjective "Christian" was joined, in so far as it appeared at all, to positive words and notions or to neutral ones such as tradition or belief.[23]

Hall's most positive contribution to mass communication study is his constant reminder that it's futile to talk about meaning without considering power at the same time. Cliff Christians, former director of the Institute for Communications Research at the University of Illinois and a leading writer in the field of media ethics, agrees with Hall that the existence of an idealistic communication situation where no power circulates is a myth. Christians is lavish in his praise of Hall's essay "Ideology and Communication Theory," which I've listed as a Second Look resource: "His essay, like the Taj Mahal, is an artistic masterpiece inviting a pilgrimage."[24]

Stuart Hall has attracted tremendous interest and a large following. Samuel Becker, former chair of the communication studies department at the University of Iowa, describes himself as a besieged empiricist and notes the irony of Hall's attack. Hall knocks the dominant ideology of communication studies, yet he "may himself be the most dominant or influential figure in communication studies today."[25]

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. *Hegemony* is not a household word in the United States. How would you explain what the term means to your roommate? Can you think of a metaphor or an analogy that would clarify this critical concept?

2. What is the nature of Hall's complaint about *American media scholarship*?

3. Hall says that the *media encode the dominant ideology of our culture*. If you don't agree with his thesis, what *evidence* could he muster that would convince you that he's right? What evidence would you provide to counter his argument?

4. In what way is Roland Barthes' *semiotic* perspective (see Chapter 26) similar to Hall's cultural studies? How do they differ?

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Stuart Hall, "Introduction" and "The Work of Representation," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices,* Stuart Hall (ed.), Sage, London, 1997, pp. 1–64.

Intellectual biography: Helen Davis, *Understanding Stuart Hall,* Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2004.

Hall's critique of the dominant communication paradigm: Stuart Hall, "Ideology and Communication Theory," in *Rethinking Communication Theory: Vol. 1,* Brenda Dervin, Lawrence

Grossberg, Barbara O'Keefe, and Ellen Wartella (eds.), Sage, Newbury Park, CA, 1989, pp. 40–52. (See also multiple reactions following.)

Hegemony, ideology, Marxism, and postmodernism: Journal of Communication Inquiry, Vol. 10, No. 2, 1986. The entire issue addresses Stuart Hall's cultural studies.

Marxist interpretations: Samuel Becker, "Marxist Approaches to Media Studies: The British Experience," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication,* Vol. 1, 1984, pp. 66–80.

Articulation of black: Stuart Hall, "Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication,* Vol. 2, 1985, pp. 91–114.

Historical perspective: Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," in *Cultural Studies,* Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (eds.), Routledge, New York, 1992, pp. 277–294.

Focused research: Paul du Gay et al., *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman,* Sage, London, 1997.

Media coverage of the war in Iraq: Deepa Kumar, "Media, War, and Propaganda: Strategies of Information Management During the 2003 Iraq War," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies,* Vol. 3, 2006, pp. 48–69.

Ideology in reality TV: Luke Winslow, "Comforting the Comfortable: *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition's* Ideological Conquest," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication,* Vol. 27, 2010, pp. 267–290.

Appreciative retrospective: Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg, and Angela McRobbie (eds.), *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall,* Verso, London, 2000.

Critical retrospective: Chris Rojek, *Stuart Hall,* Polity, Cambridge, 2003.

Critique from quantitative perspective: Justin Lewis, "What Counts in Cultural Studies?" *Media, Culture & Society,* Vol. 19, 1997, pp. 83–97.

Critique from qualitative perspective: Patrick Murphy, "Media Cultural Studies' Uncomfortable Embrace of Ethnography," *Journal of Communication Inquiry,* Vol. 23, 1999, pp. 205–221.

For self-scoring quizzes that will help you gauge your understanding of cultural studies, or any other theory covered in the book, click on Self-Help Quizzes under Theory Resources at *www.afirstlook.com.*

In 1940, before the era of television, a team of researchers from Columbia University, headed by Paul Lazarsfeld, descended on Erie County, Ohio, an area that had reflected national voting patterns in every twentieth-century presidential election. By surveying people once a month from June to November, the interviewers sought to determine how the press and radio affected the people's choice for the upcoming presidential election.[1]

Contrary to the then-accepted *magic bullet* model of direct media influence, the researchers found little evidence that voters were swayed by what they read or heard. Political conversions were rare. The media seemed merely to reinforce the decisions of those who had already made up their minds.

Lazarsfeld attributed the lack of media effect to *selective exposure* (see Chapter 17). Republicans avoided articles and programs that were favorable to President Franklin Roosevelt; Democrats bypassed news stories and features sympathetic to Republican Wendell Willkie. The principle of selective exposure didn't always test out in the laboratory, where people's attention was virtually guaranteed, but in a free marketplace of ideas it accounted for the limited, short-term effects of mass communication.

The Erie County results forced media analysts to recognize that friends and family affect the impact of media messages. They concluded that print and electronic media influence masses of people only through an indirect *two-step flow of communication.* The first stage is the direct transmission of information to a small group of people who stay well-informed. In the second stage, those opinion leaders pass on and interpret the messages to others in face-to-face discussion.

The two-step flow theory surfaced at a time of rapid scientific advancement in the fields of medicine and agriculture. The model accurately described the diffusion of innovation among American doctors and farmers in the 1950s, but the present era of saturation television and Internet news has made alterations necessary. The first step of the *revised two-step theory* of media influence is the transmission of information to a mass audience. The second step is validation of the message by people the viewer respects.[2]

By the 1970s, empirical studies on viewer response to television had reestablished belief in a *powerful effects* model of media influence, and the explanatory links between the two were becoming clear. The possible connection between violence on the screen and subsequent viewer aggression was of particular interest to media theorists.

University of Alabama media researcher Dolf Zillmann's *excitation transfer theory* recognizes that TV has the power to stir up strong feelings.[3] Although we use labels like *fear, anger, humor, love,* and *lust* to describe these emotional states, the heightened physiological arousal is similar, no matter what kind of TV program elicited the response. It's easy to get our emotional wires crossed when the show is over. Zillmann says that the heightened state of arousal takes a while to dissipate, and the leftover excitation can amplify any mood we happen to be feeling. If a man is mad at his wife, the emotional stimulation he gets from televised aggression can escalate into domestic violence. But Zillmann says that the arousal that comes from an erotic bedroom scene or a hilarious comedy often has the same effect.

Excitation transfer can account for violent acts performed immediately after TV viewing. But Stanford psychologist Albert Bandura's *social learning theory* takes the findings a step further and predicts that the use of force modeled on television today may erupt in antisocial behavior years later.[4] Although Bandura's theory can explain imitation in many contexts, most students of his work apply it specifically to the vicarious learning of aggression through television.

Social learning theory postulates three necessary stages in the causal link between television and the actual physical harm that we might inflict on another some time in the future. The three-step process is attention, retention, and motivation. Video violence grabs our *attention* because it's simple, distinctive, prevalent, useful, and depicted positively. If you doubt that last quality, remember that television draws in viewers by placing attractive people in front of the camera. There are very few overweight bodies or pimply faces on TV. When the winsome star roughs up a few hoods to rescue the lovely young woman, aggression is given a positive cast.

Without any risk to ourselves, watching media violence can expand our repertoire of behavioral options far beyond what we'd discover on our own through trial-and-error learning. For example, we see a knife fighter holding a switchblade at an inclined angle of 45 degrees and that he jabs up rather than lunging down. This kind of street smarts is mentally filed away as a visual image. But Bandura says that *retention* is strongest when we also encode vicarious learning into words: *Hold the pistol with both hands. Don't jerk the trigger; squeeze it. Aim six inches low to compensate for recoil.*

Without sufficient *motivation,* we may never imitate the violence that we saw and remember. But years later we may be convinced that we won't go to jail for shooting a prowler lurking in our backyard or that we might gain status by punching out a jerk who is hassling a friend. If so, what we learned earlier and stored in our memory bank is now at our disposal.

Communication scholars have shown surprisingly little interest in studying the dynamics of television advertising. However, advertising guru Tony Schwartz theorized that commercials are effective when they strike a *responsive chord* within the viewer.[5] Schwartz claimed that media persuasion is not so much a matter of trying to put an idea into consumers' heads as it is seeking to draw an emotional response out of them. The best commercials use sight and sound to resonate with an audience's past experience.