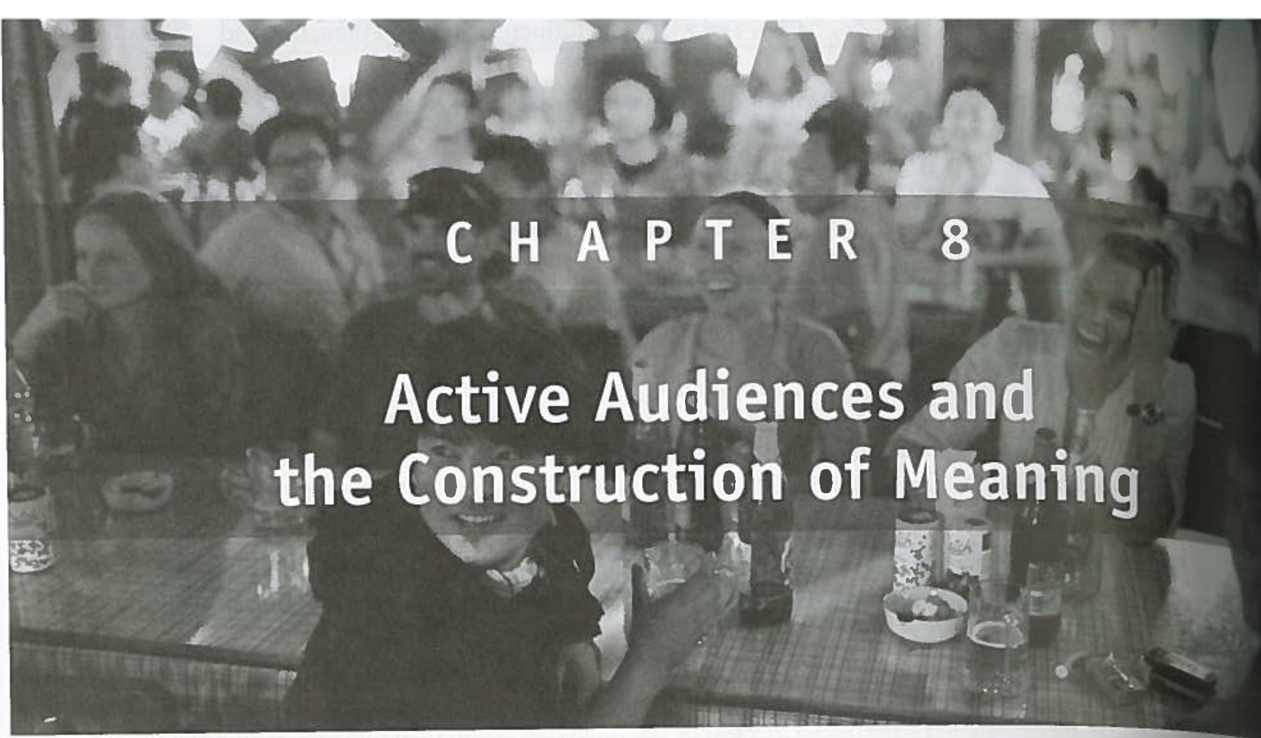


CHAPTER 8

Active Audiences and the Construction of Meaning

Source: Maciej Dakowicz/Alamy.

With the emergence of the Internet and the continuing growth in digital and interactive media, the boundary between media producer and media audience is sometimes blurry. However, even in the digital environment, most of us spend far more time as audience members—watching, reading, and listening to content created by others—than we do as media producers. Understanding media audiences, and how they make meaning of the various media products they consume, remains an essential task for media scholars.

For a long time, however, scholars and critics did not take media audiences very seriously. Concern about the potentially manipulative nature of media led researchers to focus on the messages themselves, which were subjected to rigorous scrutiny. Some research and debate focused on the ways media messages "cause" specific behaviors. Do violent movies make people use violence in their lives? Does heavy metal music cause listeners to commit suicide? Does television viewing lead teenagers to have sex at early ages? Audiences, from this perspective, were the recipients of forms of external stimulus—a movie, song, or television program—that elicited an observable response.

Certainly, researchers who focused on media effects were asking significant questions. Perhaps you can recall seeing a particularly violent movie or TV show that was so graphic that it made you wonder how it might affect other viewers. What the effects research highlighted, and what virtually all observers now accept, is that media messages matter.

They are not somehow separate from our "real" lives, picked up for fun and discarded when we turn real world pursuits. On the contrary, media messages are central to our everyday lives. This is, indeed, one of the basic premises of this book.

But there is a crucial difference between this position and one that focuses on the direct effects of media on audiences. Often, the discussion of media effects ignores living, breathing human beings. People exist only as receptacles for media messages, passive individuals whose behaviors and attitudes are the result of a powerful external force: the media. The implicit assumption is that, to understand the media's effect on people, all we need to know is what the messages say. Certainly, this image is a bit exaggerated. Few researchers would now explicitly take this position. But it does point out the underlying problem of the *effects* framework. By focusing on the effects of media, this perspective largely strips members of the audience of any human agency.

In many respects, *audience* is a problematic term. It evokes the image of a mass of passive receivers ingesting their daily dose of media products. Not surprisingly, this is the traditional media-industry image of audiences, who need do nothing except go to a movie, listen to a song, or turn on the right channel. What audiences actually think or do is irrelevant as long as they show up.

For our purposes, however, this view of audiences is insufficient. We prefer to think of audiences as active "readers" rather than passive recipients. We see the meaning of media texts as something that these active audiences construct rather than something that is delivered prefabricated by media producers. There are two good reasons for conceptualizing the audience in this way. First, it fits with our own experiences as media consumers and as members of various audiences. Second, a large body of research demonstrates that media audiences are active interpreters of media. Real people with lives, histories, and social networks are the audiences—readers, viewers, listeners, fans, and players—for media products. The notion of the active audience brings these real people into our model of media and the social world. This chapter examines the ways audiences actively interpret media, and explores new forms of activity that challenge the foundations of the idea that media audiences are passive.

THE ACTIVE AUDIENCE

A long line of media research has argued that mass media serve primarily to transmit the ideas of the dominant groups in society to the population. In this view, people are indoctrinated by media in ways that are often so thorough that they do not even realize they are being dominated. The idea that the audience is active arose in opposition to the notion of this kind of all-encompassing ideological domination. It is driven by a kind of populism that views people, not only media institutions, as wielders of power in their relationships with media messages. Proponents of the active audience theory argue that media cannot tell people what to think or how to behave in any direct way because people are not nearly as stupid, gullible, or easy to dominate as the media indoctrination perspective would have us believe.

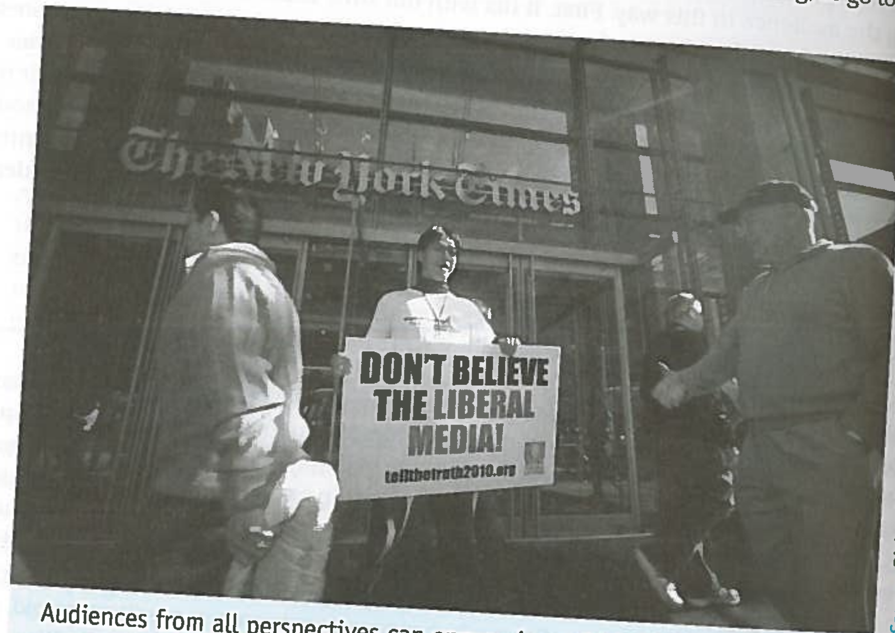
The notion of an *active audience* appeals to our belief in the intelligence and autonomy of individuals. The term is both a critique of cynicism about the power of media

and an expression of faith in the power of people. For those who do not want to simply dismiss people—especially those who enjoy devalued forms of media, such as talk shows, celebrity-oriented websites, and romance novels—the concept of the active audience is a significant step forward.

While the idea of an active audience fits with our sensibilities by granting people some power and agency in their use of media, we still have not explained what kind of activity audiences engage in. We need to move beyond the general label to define what we mean by an "active audience." There are four basic ways in which media audiences have been seen as active: through individual interpretation of media products, through collective interpretation of media, through collective political action, and through producing their own audience-centered media. We examine each of these areas of audience activity below.

Interpretation

The first kind of audience activity is *interpretive*. The meanings of media messages are not fixed; they are constructed by audience members. This construction comes from a kind of engagement with media texts, generally through routine acts of interpretation. Interpretive activity does not require a special set of skills. It is part of the process whereby media messages come to mean something to us; it is how we derive pleasure, comfort, excitement, or a wide range of intellectual or emotional stimulation. We engage in interpretive activity, to various degrees, each time we turn on the television, read a blog, listen to a song, or go to the movies.



Audiences from all perspectives can engage in a wide variety of actions to express their criticisms of the media. Here, conservative activists stand in front of the *New York Times* building to protest the "liberal media."

This interpretive activity is crucial because it is in the process of audience reception that media texts take on meaning. Producers construct complex media texts, often with a very clear idea of what they intend to say, but this intended message is not simply dumped into the minds of passive audiences. Instead, audiences interpret the message, assigning meanings to its various components. Sometimes there will be a very close correspondence between the intended meaning and the ways a particular audience interprets the message. This correlation may be the result of fine craftsmanship on the part of the producer, the use by producer and audience of a shared interpretive framework, or just plain luck. But there is no guarantee that producers will get their message across in the ways they want. Audiences may not know the implicit references, they may draw on a different interpretive framework, or they may focus on different components of the message than the producer had planned. Audiences, then, may not construct the meaning intended by the producer, nor will all audience members construct the same meaning from the same media text.

The Social Context of Interpretation

The second kind of audience activity grounds us firmly in daily life. Audiences are active in the sense that they interpret media messages socially. That is, audiences do not simply watch, read, or listen to a media text; develop independent interpretations of what it means; and stick to them. On the contrary, media are part of our social lives, and we engage with media in social settings. Sometimes we partake of media in groups; we go to the movies with a date, watch television with our family, or go to a concert with friends. Other times our media use is initially an individual activity but later becomes part of our broader social relationships. We talk with friends, roommates, or coworkers about the book we have just finished, the songs we have recently downloaded, or the news article we have just read. You might pass along a book, post an article on your Facebook page, retweet a link, or post a comment on a blog in order to pursue the discussion further. Audiences can also bridge the gap between watching television alone, while simultaneously using a "second screen"—smartphone, tablet, or laptop—to discuss the program with others online. If you stop to think about it, you might be surprised at how much of your everyday conversation is related to media.

Many people even engage with media that focus on other media: Book and film reviews in newspapers and magazines, blogs about new music, television programs that evaluate news media, and websites that provide commentary on virtually every form of mass media are all widely available. Twitter is full of real-time commentary about what's live on television, and some new stations scroll a running stream of audience tweets across the bottom of the screen. The cynic might say that this abundance of media commentary is all about marketing; in a clever move, the media industry has created a whole sector of media that is geared principally to selling other media. This is certainly part of the story, but it misses the ways audiences use these media-about-media in the social act of interpreting and evaluating media texts. In both kinds of activity—the ways audiences construct meaning and the ways audiences engage with others as they interpret media texts—we can see that audiences are far from passive.

Collective Action

A third way in which audiences can be active, as we saw in Chapter 7, is when they organize collectively to make formal demands on media producers or regulators. Whether they are outraged by the images they see in a popular film, distressed by the exclusion of their points of view from the news, or concerned about the online advertising directed at their children, audiences can engage in collective action to try to change media texts or media policies. Such collective action can include public protest, boycotts of specific media products, publicity campaigns to broaden audience indignation, online petitions, pressure on advertisers to withdraw financial support, mass letter writing to highlight audience outrage, and lobbying of Congress for government action. Citizens can also monitor the media to identify recurrent stereotypical representations and promote campaigns for change. For example, Project Censored (projectcensored.org), a media research program founded in 1976, analyzes news stories that are underreported or ignored by the U.S. corporate media and publishes an annual list of the top 25 censored stories. A growing body of research (Hackett and Carroll 2006, Jansen, Pooley, and Taub-Pervizpour 2011; McChesney, Newman, and Scott 2005; Mueller, Kuerbis, and Pagé 2004; Napoli 2007; Wible 2004) describes how organized political activity has helped to define certain media products as controversial, often mobilizing audiences to try to shape (and sometimes censor) media offerings. A number of organizations from a variety of political perspectives—such as the progressive Free Press (freepress.net) and Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR) (fair.org), or the conservative Accuracy in Media (aim.org) and Media Research Center (mrc.org)—monitor the U.S. media on a daily basis and support citizen efforts to organize for change.

Audiences as Media Producers

In addition, audience members can produce and distribute their own media, both to criticize the major media and to provide alternative perspectives that are rarely available from national media outlets. Media activists from across the political spectrum produce, post, and publish a wide range of media that evaluates, criticizes, and sometimes praises major news and entertainment media; and much of this activist media hosts online forums for audience comments and responses. In the digital age, however, the possibilities for audiences to also be media producers has expanded well beyond the realm of independent or alternative media. Just about anyone with a smartphone or a laptop can now create and distribute media in a wide variety of formats. Audiences whose activity was, until recently, generally limited to acts of individual meaning making, social interpretation, and collective action now can make their own media, often with limited technological know-how and at a relatively low cost. For example, media audiences commonly blog, tweet, contribute to wikis, and post photos and video online—often in response to the major media products they experience. In this way, the range of audience activity has expanded as the audience-producer boundary becomes increasingly blurry. Still, even with the increased opportunities for citizen-produced media, it remains difficult for most user-generated media to reach a broad public; and most audience members continue to focus on professionally produced media content. (We explore the possibilities and limits of user-generated content further in Chapter 9.)

MEANINGS: AGENCY AND STRUCTURE

The notion of active audiences does more than throw into question the traditions that identify meaning as something imposed on audiences by media texts. It undermines the very idea that each media text has a singular meaning. If audiences are active interpreters of media and if different audiences have different backgrounds, social networks, and defining experiences, then it is likely that there will be multiple interpretations of the same media text. This certainly complicates any analysis of media texts and their potential power because it destabilizes the meaning of media. No longer is it enough to ask media creators what they had in mind in making a film, developing a video game, or composing a song. Nor is it enough to use the skills of the literary critic to uncover the hidden meaning of texts. Understanding media requires that we explore the interpretive strategies of real people as they encounter various forms of media.

Agency and Polysemy

In the field of cultural studies, scholars use the term *polysemy* to describe the notion of multiple meanings in media texts. Media are said to be polysemic—to have multiple meanings. But where do these meanings come from? Is polysemy the result of audience activity, or is it the result of the properties of the media themselves? In other words, are multiple meanings simply the result of different audience members constructing different interpretations, or do they exist because the texts themselves are "open"—that is, structured in such a way as to allow for multiple readings?

One cultural studies scholar, John Fiske (1986), has argued that media texts contain an "excess" of meaning within them. Many of the components of a television program, for example, will fit together into one relatively consistent interpretation that is likely to be the dominant interpretation. But lots of bits and pieces around the edges of the program do not quite fit, and the dominant interpretation cannot completely contain them. Humor and irony are particularly tricky because they are full of the kind of ambiguity that can be interpreted in different ways. Media, from this perspective, contain the raw materials for multiple interpretations; the texts are structured in ways that facilitate, even if they do not encourage, people's "reading against the grain."

Movies, websites, music, television, and all kinds of advertisements are packed with potentially meaningful images, words, and sounds. It is no wonder, then, that each and every piece of a media text does not fit perfectly into a coherent whole. We are not talking about a simple jigsaw puzzle; a better metaphor would be a jigsaw puzzle with far too many pieces. You need only some of the pieces to create a picture, but choosing different pieces will result in different pictures. The same can be said of media texts.

Let's look at an example: What makes a movie an "antiwar" film? The most straightforward response is that a movie is antiwar if its message is critical of or in opposition to warfare. But as we saw in the previous chapter, the makers of the television series *M*A*S*H* were astounded to find that some viewers saw their antiwar messages as actually making the military attractive. So who is to determine that the message in a film is critical of warfare? The filmmaker? The leading film critics? The trained media scholar? All of these

people may have quite sophisticated analyses of why a specific film should or should not be considered antiwar. In fact, we might even be comfortable relying on such prominent analysts to decide whether we should label the film "antiwar." But even a film that seems to have all the qualities of an antiwar film and leads us to question the morality of organized warfare (for example, films about the Iraq War such as *Green Zone, The Hurt Locker, Redacted*, or *Act of Valor*) will likely contain elements that can be used as the basis for very different interpretations. Perhaps a film depicts soldiers brutally and indiscriminately killing a group of defenseless noncombatants. Is there more than one way to interpret this scene? Although many, perhaps even most, people would likely find this scene horrific, it is likely to provide the seeds of an alternate interpretation, suggesting, for example, the necessity of war, the commitment of soldiers, or the evil of our enemies. Perhaps the victims did not speak the same language as the soldiers, or the soldiers expressed fear or confusion, or the battle is proclaimed a victory later in the film. Any of these circumstances can be the key to different readings of even an apparently straightforward text.

Is one interpretation of the film "correct" and another just plain "wrong"? Can we say that the film is really an antiwar film and those who see otherwise just don't get it? Of course we can and, in fact, we regularly do when we talk—perhaps argue—with friends and family about a movie we have just seen. Did *Zero Dark Thirty*, the 2012 Academy Award nominated film about the search for and ultimate killing of Osama Bin Laden, depict the effectiveness of harsh interrogation techniques, including torture? Or did the film portray the brutality and moral complexity of torture? Upon its release, *Zero Dark Thirty* sparked widespread debate about what, indeed, the filmmakers were saying about torture, and how the film's narrative squared with the historical record. Even if we are sure our interpretations are correct, these convictions are ultimately of little consequence if the film means something else to others. It is likely, then, that media texts do have some degree of openness in their very structure, making widely divergent readings possible—even though difficult.

Given the substantial competition for the attention of audiences, this kind of openness is a highly desirable feature for mass-market media. The most successful media often have components that appeal to different audiences. Take, for example, the pioneering HBO drama series *The Sopranos*. The show revolved around Italian-American mob boss Tony Soprano and his effort to manage his family and private life, as well as his criminal activity and the extended family around it. Tony Soprano is clearly an antihero; he kills and exploits, yet the audience is called to identify with him and must—at some level—find him likeable (Carroll 2004). Many of the characters in *The Sopranos* were portrayed as morally ambiguous, busy with eating and killing; as a result, some Italian Americans expressed frustration at the representations of Italian Americans offered in the series. Congresswoman Marge Roskema (R-New Jersey) brought the question to Congress, introducing a resolution condemning HBO and the series creator David Chase for propagating offensive stereotypes (Lavery 2002). The entire series is built on contrasting meanings and spurs ambiguous feelings in the audience—and this is one of the keys to its success. As David Chase explained, "We all have the freedom to let the audience figure out what's going on rather than telling them what's going on" (quoted in Lavery 2006: 5).

In one classic study, Jhally and Lewis (1992) explored the ambiguity of media texts in their study of audiences for the hit sitcom, *The Cosby Show*. As we saw in the previous chapter, white audiences either interpreted the Huxtable family to be, for all intents and

purposes, "white" because they were upper-middle class or saw the Huxtable family's success as an indication of the end of racism in the United States, providing evidence that black families can be just like white families. Black audiences expressed pride in the portrayal of a successful black family on national television, and many were pleased to see such a positive representation of blacks. For black audiences, this positive image did not mean that the Huxtables were "white," nor did it signify the end of racial discrimination. In short, black and white audiences drew very different lessons about race relations from *The Cosby Show*. From the standpoint of the producers of the program, however, this ambiguity was its very beauty. It may be that popularity in a diverse society requires ambiguity; in the case of *Cosby*, both blacks and whites could enjoy the program even though they interpreted it in very different ways.

Perks (2012) found a similar dynamic among viewers of *Chappelle's Show*. While a diverse array of viewers found *Chappelle's Show* funny and enjoyable to watch, audiences from different racial backgrounds decoded the program differently. Describing her focus group discussions with viewers, Perks notes that some viewers enjoyed Dave Chappelle's "truth telling" approach to comedy, but they defined the truth in more than one way: "the voices of many African American participants indicated that the show presented a unique and realistic African American perspective, whereas non-African American participants commonly found the show's stereotypes to be realistic" (p. 302). Differently located audiences may indeed be laughing for quite different reasons.

You can see how the ideas of an active audience and a polysemic text open up the meaning of media. Does that mean that audiences are interpretive "free agents," that they can derive any meaning they want, or that the meaning of texts is limited only by the number of audience members? There is a tendency in some branches of media studies to really push the boundaries, arguing that ways of making meaning are so diverse that we cannot fully understand them and that, in fact, audience members have the ultimate power in their interactions with media because they can make the media texts mean whatever they like. In this view, social structure is almost completely erased, and audiences are no longer constrained at all. The texts themselves matter very little. They are not simply open; they are wide open to be interpreted in a limitless number of ways.

This view replaces one oversimplified perspective (meaning is given) with an alternative (meaning is entirely open) that suffers from the same basic flaw. In essence, this latter view is all agency and no structure. In disputing the notion that media texts have any meaning prior to their interpretation, this view makes the texts themselves irrelevant. And in arguing that interpretations are virtually limitless, this position neglects the social context in which we experience and interpret media, the often familiar conventions that media representations use, and the underlying patterns these interpretations have.

Structure and Interpretive Constraint

We are not simply "free" of constraints when we experience media; we do not live in some electronic netherworld. We experience media as part of daily life, not separate from it, and our lives unfold in specific social locations. Our ages, occupations, marital and parental status, races, genders, neighborhoods, educational backgrounds, and the like help structure our daily lives and our media experiences. Media texts are not a random hodgepodge; those

that seek a mass audience are built around familiar images and traditional themes that regular media users are likely to have experience interpreting. Media messages matter, but so do our locations in various social groups. Social location matters because it shapes whom we talk to about different media, what we perceive to be our own best interests and most important concerns, and what kinds of interpretive frameworks we bring to our media experiences.

The task, then, is to be mindful of how meaning is constructed by socially located audiences under specific historical circumstances. This means that we have to understand both the role of agency—audiences constructing meaning—and the role of structure—the patterns of interpretation and the social locations that shape them. Who we are does not determine how we will interpret media texts, but neither are our social identities irrelevant. At the same time, media texts do not have singular meanings to be detected by audiences, but neither do they have limitless meanings.

Some meanings will be easier to construct because they draw on widely shared cultural values and sets of assumptions about the way the world works. Other meanings will be less commonly derived because they require substantial rethinking or depend on the use of alternative informational resources. As a result, meaning may be actively constructed by audiences, but in most cases, one interpretation is likely to be most common and fit with the underlying values of the culture. We can think of this as the "preferred" reading, in that the text itself is most amenable to this interpretation. Of course, the possibility still exists for alternative readings, and one's "interpretive community," or web of social networks, is one of the keys to whether people interpret media in line with the "preferred" reading or with some divergent reading.

DECODING MEDIA AND SOCIAL POSITION

Our discussions with friends and family about the meaning of media messages provide strong evidence that audiences indeed interpret media in diverse ways. At the same time, as we explored in Chapter 6, media products are often ideological in the sense that they consistently promote certain messages over others. These ideological representations are most powerful when they pervade the realm of "common sense," such that competing meanings are no longer even entertained. This is an apparent contradiction. How can we negotiate the terrain between the active audience and the ideological nature of many media texts? By pointing to the role of social structure, several classic studies helped reconcile the forces of ideological constraint and audience agency in the interpretation of media.

Class, *Nationwide*, and the Encoding–Decoding Model

As we have seen, the notion of the active audience raised serious questions for the study of media. It was no longer enough, for example, to study the content of media messages because such messages are at least partially open to different interpretations. But where do these different interpretations come from? One answer is in the relationship of meaning to social position. In pioneering research, David Morley (1980) tackled this question in his study of the British television "magazine" program *Nationwide*. In short, Morley analyzed

the text of the *Nationwide* broadcast to determine the "preferred" meaning of the messages, and he interviewed groups of people from different social backgrounds who had viewed the program to see if and how social position and meaning making are related.

If we are to understand the relationship between media and society, Morley's question is a profound one. A focus on the individual act of interpretation may be preferable to the notion of a passive audience, but it tells us little about what media messages will mean to different audiences. It is tempting to believe that people are simply free to construct their own interpretations because this radically individualist position assigns great power to each of us. However, research on audiences suggests that social position influences interpretation. It acts as a central mediator of the interpretive process—not as a determinant of meaning but as a key provider of the resources we use to decode media messages.

Morley (1980) explores this terrain, paying particular attention to the role of social class. In his study of *Nationwide*, he makes use of Stuart Hall's ([1973] 1980) "encoding–decoding" model, a method that highlights both messages and their interpretations by audiences. One of the key contributions of this model is the way it conceptualizes media—borrowing from linguistics—as messages that are constructed according to certain "codes." Understanding or "decoding" these messages requires knowledge of the conventions of the medium and the workings of the culture. Because we are all connected in various ways to our media-saturated culture, much of this competence is so taken for granted that we do not even think about it.

Even though our competence may seem "natural" when we watch television, browse the Internet, scan our Twitter feed, or pick up a fashion magazine, our abilities to interpret these media depend on our familiarity with the basic codes of each medium. (We saw this in our discussion of photography in Chapter 4.) We know about beginnings and endings of programs and articles, about the relationship between pictures and words, about the presence (or absence) of the author, about the difference between advertisements and the articles or programs, about banner ads and pop-up windows, about retweets and news feeds, and so on. Imagine what television viewing would be like if we did not understand the ad–program relationship. It would seem like a random jumble of images. Or what if we had no idea about the codes of supermarket tabloids? We might be shocked by the newest "revelations" instead of being entertained by them. Think about what *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* would look like to someone who is not familiar with the codes of "fake news." Without some implicit knowledge about the codes of satire and comedy, it is likely that the newcomer would be confused by the way the audience laughs and Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert poke fun at politicians.

Media messages also draw on broader sets of cultural codes about how the world works. These codes build on assumptions that do not have to be articulated. In other words, the meaning of media texts depends, to a great degree, on the taken for granted. News stories about the president's day do not have to explain why he is important, magazine images assume certain definitions of beauty or success, and films and television programs draw on layers of assumptions about relationships between men and women, parents and children, the rich and the poor. Decoding, then, is the process whereby audiences use their implicit knowledge of both medium-specific and broader cultural codes to interpret the meaning of a media text.

The encoding–decoding model focuses on the relationship between the media message, as it is constructed or "encoded" by a media producer, and the ways that message is interpreted

or "decoded" by audiences. Encoding and decoding are connected because they are processes that focus on the same media text, but a particular decoding does not necessarily follow from a specific encoded meaning. According to this model, producers create media texts in ways that encode a preferred or "dominant" meaning—the interpretation that will most likely follow from a decoding based on the codes of the medium and the dominant assumptions that underpin our social lives. Morley (1980) suggests a very simple approach: People can read the preferred meaning, they can develop a "negotiated" reading, or they can draw on extratextual resources to construct an "oppositional" reading. The question for Morley, then, focuses on which groups decode messages in line with the preferred meaning and which groups produce negotiated or oppositional meanings.

The *Nationwide* study indicated that there was a tendency for people from different socioeconomic classes to interpret the meaning of the television program in different ways. There was no direct correlation between class and interpretation, and Morley was reluctant to draw definitive conclusions from this study. Still, the general pattern is worthy of our attention. In decoding *Nationwide* coverage of economic issues, workers and managers constructed very different interpretations. The bank managers whom Morley interviewed read the preferred meaning. They saw so little controversy in the presentation of the economy that they focused their attention on the program's style rather than its content. Morley argues that the *Nationwide* framework was a perfect fit with the commonsense views of the bank managers. The group of trade unionists he interviewed saw the economic coverage as entirely favoring management. At the same time, younger management trainees also saw the coverage as ideological, but they saw it as favoring the unions. Morley reports that these distinctions between the interpretations of the bank managers, management trainees, and trade unionists are rather sharp. He concludes that

> these examples of the totally contradictory readings of the same programme item, made by managers and trade unionists, do provide us with the clearest examples of the way in which the "meaning" of a programme or "message" depends upon the interpretive code which the audience brings to the decoding situation. (Morley 1992: 112)

Students from different social classes also derived different meanings from the items in *Nationwide*. Groups of middle-class students criticized the program for failing to include enough detail in its coverage of issues. They viewed it as lacking the seriousness that would make an informational program worthwhile. It was, in their view, a trivial program. The mainly black, working-class students used an entirely different evaluative scheme. They suggested that the program was too detailed and, ultimately, boring. For these students, the program was also viewed as largely worthless, not for its trivial nature but because it lacked the entertainment value that makes television worthwhile. In short, the groups of students from different classes approached *Nationwide* with distinct interpretive frameworks—one group focused on information, the other on entertainment—and thus viewed the program in dramatically different ways.

In evaluating the meaning of this study, Morley (1980) makes an important qualification about his results to which we should pay careful attention. Social class, Morley argues, does not determine how people interpret media messages. Meaning is class stratified but not in

ways that are constant or entirely predictable. If we reduce meaning making to some simple formula focused on social class, we deny audiences the agency that the active audience theory has so usefully brought to our attention.

How, then, does class influence interpretation? Social class—and we would add age, race, ethnicity, gender, and other central markers of identity—plays a key role in providing us with cultural "tools" for decoding. Some class-based tools are useful for navigating the world of politics (Croteau 1995). Others are helpful for decoding media. Among the media-related cultural tools are what we might call *discursive resources*, for example, the language, concepts, and assumptions associated with a particular subculture or a political perspective. Different groups of people will have access to different discursive resources for decoding media messages. The distinction between "negotiated" and "oppositional" readings is significant in this context because oppositional readings require that audiences have access to discursive resources that allow them to make meanings opposing the preferred one. For example, trade union activists bring a discourse of union politics—involving "the introduction of a new model, outside the terms of reference provided by the programme" (Morley 1992: 117)—to bear on their interpretation of messages about the economy. This allowed them, in Morley's study, to produce readings critical of the economic organization of society. We can easily imagine oppositional readings among other groups with sufficient discursive resources. Perhaps a feminist perspective—again, a set of discursive resources—provides some women with the tools to make oppositional readings of the images in popular women's magazines.

It should not be surprising that people occupying different social positions possess different kinds of discursive resources. Our social positions provide the frames through which we view the world, making some things visible and others more difficult to see. If, indeed, social position shapes the tools we have available for interpreting media images, then the meanings we assign to different media products will ultimately be related to social position. Audiences are still active in this view; they still have to do the decoding work, and access to particular tools does not guarantee a particular interpretation. But the same cultural tools are not available to everyone. Our social positions provide us with differential access to an array of cultural tools, which we use to construct meaning in more or less patterned ways. The result is a model of humans as active agents constrained by specific structural conditions.

Gender, Class, and Television

Morley's study of *Nationwide* was, of course, only a start; the study raised some enduring questions and provided tentative answers. Most important, it provided an example of audience research that was both cognizant of the interpretive activity of audiences and grounded in the social world. Other researchers followed this fruitful path, examining the ways different audiences interpreted similar media texts. Andrea Press's (1991) study, *Women Watching Television*, is one of the well-known studies that have focused on the relationship between social structure and audience interpretation. Press interviewed middle-class and working-class women, focusing on their backgrounds, their attitudes toward gender issues, and their television viewing histories and preferences.

Press suggests that middle-class women watch television differently from working-class women in that they use a different set of criteria for evaluating programs and identifying

with television characters. The first difference is in assessing the degree of "realism" of television programs. Women from different classes view this issue in widely disparate terms. Working-class women place a high value on images they believe to be realistic, while middle-class women do not expect television to be realistic. Working-class women are likely to view televised depictions of middle-class life as realistic, especially in comparison to what they see as the "unreal" (and uncommon) depictions of working-class life. Middle-class women are much less likely to think about whether the programs are realistic as, for the most part, they assume (and accept) that they are not.

The results of these differences, Press (1991) argues, are substantial. In short, the combination of a focus on realism and a sense that common television images of the middle-class household are realistic portrayals leads working-class women to an interpretation that devalues their own class position. In other words, as Press puts it, "Working-class women are particularly vulnerable to television's presentation of the material accouterments of middle-class life as the definition of what is normal in society" (p. 138).

While middle-class women may be cynical about the realistic nature of television depictions, they are much more receptive to depictions of women on television than their working-class counterparts. Working-class women were consistently critical of the image of both the independent working woman and the stereotypically sexy woman—two stock images for television characters—in large part because they perceive them to be unrealistic. Working-class women belittled and even dismissed popular images of women because these images bear little resemblance to their sense of what it means to be a woman in American society. Middle-class women, however, were much more likely to focus on the positive nature of these images, either defending such televised characters or indicating a sense of identification with them. The result is that middle-class women's interpretations of televised images of women are part of their own definitions of womanhood, whereas working-class women show a tendency to resist these interpretations.

We can see that class plays a central role in how audiences make sense of television images. We can use Press's (1991) research to suggest a broader speculative connection between social class, production, content, and audience interpretation—all elements of our media/society model. Because of their lived experience, working-class women know that most television programs present a distorted, unrealistic picture of working-class life in general and working-class women in particular. However, without extensive lived experience of middle-class life, working-class women are more likely to accept the media's portrayal of the middle class as plausibly realistic. Middle-class women, on the other hand, are more likely to have a background similar to that of middle-class media producers, including having a shared and taken-for-granted understanding of class. Middle-class women, therefore, largely ignore questions of class and find the media's depiction of women's roles as "normal" because the images more closely reflect their own middle-class perspective. Thus, we have more evidence that social position and meaning making are connected, albeit in complex and indirect ways.

Race, News, and Meaning Making

Morley's (1980) and Press's (1991) studies are representative of a larger body of work on media audiences, their interpretive strategies, their cultural tools, and their relationships to

the media industry. Scholars have used a similar approach to study the meaning of a broad array of media texts.

For example, Darnell Hunt (1997) examined the ways that differently "raced" groups interpreted television news coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. The riots erupted after the announcement of the not guilty verdict for the police officers who had severely beaten black motorist Rodney King in an incident that was captured on videotape and aired repeatedly on television news. Hunt noted that attitudes about the riots differed dramatically by race. Much like the subsequent racial divide in views about the O. J. Simpson murder trial, public opinion surveys showed that black and white Americans had very different understandings of the roots, significance, and consequences of the events in Los Angeles in April 1992.

In an effort to make sense of the relationship between media power and audience power, Hunt showed a 17-minute news report from the first night of the riots to 15 groups from the Los Angeles area, equally divided among white, African American, and Latino groups, and asked each group to discuss what they would say to a 12-year-old child about what they just saw. Hunt's analysis of these group discussions showed that responses to this news segment did not vary much by gender or class but that there were significant racial differences in how viewers interpreted the news. Given the differences in attitudes toward the riots, it comes as no surprise that race was a significant factor here.

Because Hunt (1997) "was interested in analyzing how the social locations of informants may have influenced" (p. 172) their interpretation of the news coverage, he did more than just take note of the racially stratified perspectives. He showed some of the ways that these differences unfold as viewers actively make sense of television news. For example, Hunt found that black viewers were much more likely than either Latino or white viewers to use solidarity (we, us, our) or distance (they, them, their) pronouns in the group discussion. As black viewers discussed the news coverage of the riots, they identified themselves and the larger issues in racial terms, something that was absent in the white groups' discussions and far less common in the Latino discussions. In addition, the African American and Latino groups were more visibly active than the white groups as they watched the news segment. Whereas the Latino and especially the black groups talked, laughed, and were generally animated during the screening of the news, the white groups were quiet and motionless as they watched. The ongoing talk among the black viewers was not idle banter but was full of commentary about the news and its credibility. In fact, Hunt found that the black viewers "seemed predisposed to questioning many of the assumptions embedded" (p. 143) in the news coverage, challenging both the accuracy of and the terminology used in the newscast. In contrast, Hunt argued that the white viewers were much more comfortable with the way the newscast covered the events.

Drawing on Morley's (1980) framework, Hunt (1997) argued that the viewers in his study constructed "negotiated" readings of the news, with different groups bringing different resources to their decoding. Black viewers were far more likely to decode the news in ways that suggested an alternative or oppositional interpretation of the riots, whereas the white and Latino viewers were likely to interpret the news in line with the text's preferred meaning. Hunt suggested that this racial difference in decoding media was, in large part, the result of differences in social networks and the sense of group solidarity among the different groups. In this particular case, the discursive resources associated with racial identity

accompanied by conversation and other household activities. For women, just sitting down to watch television without doing anything else seems like a waste of time. In addition, men and women generally view the same programs because they watch television together in the evening, but they do not view them with the same attentiveness. In short, our interpretations of television programs are connected to our engagement with the program. We may tune in to get information, to relax, to find excitement, to tune out the noises of the highway next to our house, or to gather the family for a rare moment of togetherness. These different approaches to television will help shape the meaning we attach to different programs.

Television is a great conversation generator. Because it is so widely viewed, television is the subject of much small talk. When we talk about television or other forms of media with our friends and families, we engage in a kind of collective interpretive activity. We recount what happened, why it happened, what it means, and what is likely to happen next. All of this is part of a process by which we construct meanings for television programs—or movies, songs, blog posts, and so on. After watching a particularly interesting or funny television program, attending a provocative movie, or reading a humorous series of tweets, we tend to seek out others to talk with, hoping that they have seen or read the same item. Perhaps this is why people go to the movies or a concert with others; even though the viewing or listening in these settings allows for little conversation, you can talk with your friends about the event on the way home.

According to Morley (1986), talking about television, while common among women, is rarely admitted by men. Men either do not talk with friends about television or are unwilling to admit that they engage in a behavior they define as feminine. Morley suggests that this has real consequences:

> Given that meanings are made not simply in the moment of individual viewing, but also in subsequent social processes of discussion and "digestion" of material viewed, the men's much greater reluctance to talk about (part of) their viewing will mean that their consumption of television material is of a quite different kind from that of their wives. (p. 158)

Interaction with media and discussions about media products are important parts of the process of meaning making. Here again, we can see how meanings are generated in social settings by active audiences. Radway and others have adopted the term *interpretive community* to suggest both the social structural forces at work—our membership in communities—and the forces of human agency—the act of interpretation. When we think about audiences, then, we need to remember that the meanings people make of apparently omnipresent media products are connected to experiences and social structures outside the world of media. Media are, in essence, part of our lives and must be understood in the context of the relationships that constitute our lives.

ACTIVE AUDIENCES AND INTERPRETIVE RESISTANCE

The meaning of media messages, as we have seen, cannot be reduced to the "encoded" or "preferred" or even most common reading of a particular media text. Audiences, drawing on specific sets of cultural resources and located in specific social settings, actively interpret media products. The distribution of social and cultural power remains significant, for it structures the discursive resources at our command, the context in which we use media, and the production of media texts. But this power is not absolute or uncontested. The power to define social reality, of which the media are a part, is not something that is simply imposed on unwitting audiences. If media messages circulate versions of a "dominant" ideology, these messages are only the raw materials of meaning; they require construction and are subject to revision.

It is clear that the relationship among media messages, audiences, and meaning is a complex one. We cannot treat the media as some simple vehicle for brainwashing people. This realization has led many scholars to investigate the possibility that some audiences interpret media texts in an "oppositional" way or engage in a kind of interpretive "resistance." Some critics argue that a political struggle is occurring at the level of individual interpretation, thereby rescuing "the people" from a perception that they consent to current social and political arrangements. In other words, audiences "resist" the imposition of preferred meanings, actively reinterpreting media messages in contrary, even subversive, ways.

These claims of interpretive resistance employ an image of audiences as "semiological guerillas," fighting a daily war against the symbolic power of the media industry (Carragee 1990). Rather than small arms and sneak attacks, the weapons these guerillas use are their own interpretive skills, which they deploy against the purveyors of ideological conformity. The war is waged each day in small, virtually invisible ways in the very act of reading the newspaper or going to the movies. However, with its focus on the almost unlimited agency of audiences, the resistance thesis has a tendency to be far too casual in its dismissal of social structure.

Instead of simply assuming that media audiences consistently behave as symbolic resistance fighters, we need to examine more specifically the ways particular audiences produce from media texts meanings that can be characterized as oppositional. Theorists have argued that individuals resist the definitional power of authorities by reinterpreting media messages, but research has demonstrated neither the process by which such interpretations become oppositional nor the conditions under which such resistance occurs. Instead, the argument for the possibilities of resistance is largely the result of faith in the power of citizens to think and behave as active subjects rather than passive objects of history. Such faith and optimism, while admirable political qualities, do not adequately explain the relationship between active audiences and a powerful culture industry, nor do they provide the basis for understanding the possibilities for and conditions conducive to actual resistance.

If audiences do engage in interpretive resistance by constructing oppositional meanings from media products, we should be able to look at specific examples of these practices. Indeed, several important cases touch on these issues; as we have seen, Morley's (1980) study of *Nationwide* and Radway's (1991) study of romance readers certainly suggest that audiences have the capacity to produce meanings that are at least partially oppositional. Hunt (1997) concluded his study of news about the Los Angeles riots by suggesting that viewer opposition to the assumptions embedded in the news can be seen "either as constituting meaningful acts of resistance in their own right, or contributing to a consciousness necessary for meaningful social action at some later point in time" (p. 162).

In addition, Naomi Klein (2000) has explored the ways that "culture jamming"—for example, when activists remake billboards to create counter-advertisements with messages that parody or criticize the original ad—is creating "a climate of semiotic Robin Hoodism" (p. 280). The main strategy employed by culture jammers is known as "pranking" (Harold 2004). Typical pranks include sabotage and appropriation of company symbols and products in order to communicate a different message than originally intended by the producer. The *Yes Men* duo and *Adbusters* magazine are probably the most well-known examples of "culture jamming." Adbusters (adbusters.org) engages with the creation of "subvertizements" (ads mimicking mainstream brands) and "uncommercials" (subversive TV and radio spots) (Liacas 2005). Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno, a.k.a. the *Yes Men* (theyesmen.org), use parody to expose deception perpetrated by multinational corporations, governments, and transnational organizations. For example, the Yes Men created a spoof of the World Trade Organization's (WTO) website, which looked so real that they received invitations to address various groups on behalf of the WTO, where they offered stinging critiques of international economic institutions. The 2009 documentary *The Yes Men Fix the World* chronicles the group's culture jamming activities. One media scholar (Strauss 2011) suggests that the film can be an effective tool for teaching public relations students about corporate social responsibility and professional ethics. Just as important, Strauss argues that the film—and culture jamming, more generally—may offer students and teachers a sense of possibility:

> The "Yes Men" movie's final segment invokes the power of individual and collective action and encourages the watcher to do as the Yes Men do: identify injustice in the world, point it out to others, and work to remedy it. In this way, it can be a valuable motivator for students who may have become jaded or feel powerless to address the problems and injustice in society. Perhaps just as importantly, it can also have a similar effect on the instructor by rejuvenating the belief that our chosen profession, and the students we teach, can make a positive impact on our world. (Strauss 2011: 547)

Interpretive Resistance and Feminist Politics

Resistance can be said to occur when people read media messages in ways that oppose their preferred or commonsensical meaning, articulating a kind of refusal to accept dominant meanings. That is, audiences resist the imposition of meaning and construct new readings that stand in political opposition to the preferred meanings. Linda Steiner's (1988) study of the "No Comment" feature of the original *Ms.* magazine provides a good example of oppositional decoding among a community of readers. *Ms.* was a glossy feminist monthly founded in 1972 and subsequently reincarnated as an advertising-free, less slick bimonthly in 1990. It published "No Comment" each month as a compilation of reader-submitted items—mostly advertisements—that were offered as evidence of sexism in American society. The submissions came from a wide range of sources, including large and small newspapers, magazines, catalogs, and billboards, and often several people submitted the same item.

"No Comment" was a space where readers of *Ms.* could identify images from mainstream media and "expose" their underlying sexism. One common set of images depicted

women as the property of men; an insurance ad, for example, suggested that wives were "possessions," and a news article identified a female politician simply by citing her husband's name. Other themes included images that dismissed feminism, advertising that blatantly exploited women's bodies, images that implied that women enjoy sexual violence, and items that trivialized women's accomplishments. One of the more popular items—submitted to *Ms.* by more than 40 people—was a 1977 quote from a prominent U.S. Army general that appeared in *Parade* magazine; it criticized women for entering West Point because this deprived men of their positions.

Ms. readers likely either gasped in outrage or had a good laugh, or perhaps both, when they read the items in "No Comment." But what does this have to do with resistance? Steiner (1988) argues that the point of "No Comment" was precisely for the community of feminists around *Ms.* to collectively resist media messages that reinforced a sexist image of the world. The items were put on display in "No Comment" and decoded in ways that opposed their dominant meaning precisely so that the traditional definitions of what it means to be a woman could be resisted by *Ms.* readers.

No doubt, in this case, those who submitted the items were interpreting the messages in ways contrary to their intended meanings. And as *Ms.* is a feminist publication, it is likely that readers of "No Comment" drew on a set of cultural tools that would lead to a widely shared oppositional reading of the images as "sexist." Readers may give themselves a pat on the back for their critical interpretive skills and wink knowingly at others who read such texts in opposition. But does exposing images as sexist provide a means for readers to actually "resist" the culture and society they define as sexist?

There is good reason to see this action as more than just "oppositional decoding" of media images and to define the public presentation of these interpretations in "No Comment" as a kind of resistance. While such resistance may not change social structures, it helps create a feminist group identity. Collective refusal to accept traditional interpretations of femininity gives strength to such an oppositional identity, with real potential consequences. In this case, when mass media images of women were read in oppositional ways by the feminist community, the decodings helped solidify a feminist identity opposing the traditional norms and roles that are the underpinnings of the media images being exposed.

These decodings were not, however, solitary acts of interpretation; they were both public and collective. When readers submitted items to the "No Comment" section as a way of sharing their oppositional decodings with like-minded feminists, they helped build a shared meaning system that could serve as a basis for social solidarity within the feminist community. In so doing, they drew on and helped reproduce a feminist discourse that served as a key resource for such oppositional readings. If there is resistance here, it is not just at the level of individual interpretation. We need to locate the oppositional decodings in the context of a feminist community that provided the cultural resources for such interpretations and served as a site where meaning making became a more explicitly political act.

Resistance and Identity

Other feminist scholars have explored the ways women respond to and resist media images. In her discussion of the relationship between media images of dancing and the activity itself,

Angela McRobbie (1984) argues that teenage girls construct interpretations of dance films such as *Flashdance*, in ways that oppose the dominant meaning of the film. Rather than reading the film as a story about a woman who marries her boss's son, using her sexuality to please men in the process of becoming a successful dancer, the girls in McRobbie's study decoded the film in ways that highlighted their own autonomy and sexuality. Dancing, in this interpretation, is not about pleasing or displaying one's body for men; it is about enjoying one's own body and is an expression of sexuality. This reading opposes the dominant interpretation of female sexuality by asserting a sexual identity that does not require the approval of men. The girls drew on their own experiences of dancing in clubs to reinterpret *Flashdance* in ways that supported their own identities as strong, independent, and sexual females.

Teenage fans of performers such as Madonna and Cyndi Lauper, according to Lisa Lewis (1990), engaged in a similar kind of interpretive resistance. Performances that built on apparently traditional images of female sexuality and male pleasure—and styles of dress that drew on the same images—were interpreted by teenage fans as expressions of their own desires. For female teenage fans, the sexuality of these videos—which differed dramatically from the traditional MTV video—was a sign of female power because women were the subjects, not the objects. Female fans who imitated the style of these female performers, rather than adorning themselves for men, were asserting their demands for fame, power, and control without giving up their identity as girls. This was the core of their interpretations of the music video texts—texts routinely dismissed in the broader culture as negative portrayals of women.

What connection do these examples have to resistance? Both suggest that there is a relationship between oppositional forms of decoding and social action. These oppositional decodings are part of the construction of a subcultural identity that embodies a resistance to traditional norms and roles. The female fans, in the case of MTV, were principal players in the struggle over music video images—their demands on the music industry helped open the door for female musicians. Also, in both cases, the oppositional decoding is not free-floating; it is part of the collective activities of audiences in specific social settings. Still, the media industry has shown a remarkable capacity for finding ways to package resistance as a new style. In *The Conquest of Cool*, Thomas Frank (1997) shows how the advertising industry co-opted a rebellious youth culture, developing new marketing campaigns that build on the discourse of rebellion and liberation to promote new forms of "hip consumerism."

Ultimately, the key question about the possibility of resistance concerns the social consequences. How are these interpretations linked to social action? We have seen three examples that provide a clear analysis of the relationships among oppositional decoding, human activity, cultural tools, and social setting. Such examples suggest that oppositional decoding and resistance are useful concepts, but they need to be used with care (Condit 1989). Instead of admiring the almost unlimited capability of people to resist domination, we need to take the notion of resistance seriously by looking at the conditions under which concrete audiences engage in such resistance and what consequences follow.

THE PLEASURES OF MEDIA

Perhaps the principal reason we spend so much time with media is that it is fun. We listen to our favorite music, go to the movies, browse through a popular magazine, or spend the

evening online or in front of the television because these activities are enjoyable or relaxing. The media world is, in large part, a world of entertainment, offering us a wide range of choices for how to entertain ourselves. We spend a large portion of our lives having fun and seeking pleasure from the media. But making a rigid distinction between entertainment ("it's only entertainment") and the serious stuff that "really matters" would be a mistake. We need to take fun seriously and explore what it is that makes media a source of pleasure.

Media scholars historically have tended to be suspicious of the pleasures of media. On one hand, media research through the 1970s paid almost exclusive attention to "serious" forms of media, particularly news. On the other hand, pleasure itself was seen as the problem: Media entertained people as a means of distracting them from the more important arenas in life. After all, how can people challenge the social order if they are busy each evening watching *American Idol* or updating their Facebook pages?

Instead of dismissing fun or assuming that it makes people content with the status quo, more recent work has examined the specific sources of media pleasure and the conditions under which people derive fun from media. Feminists, in particular, have focused their attention on the realm of pleasure, arguing that the pleasures associated with mass media can be liberating for women (Walters 1995). Feminist media scholar Ien Ang, in a now classic study of *Dallas* (1985), points to fantasy as the key to explaining the pleasures of media, noting that fantasy allows us to imagine that we are different, that social problems can be solved, or that we can live in a utopia. The meanings of such media pleasures cannot be perceived simply by analyzing a media text; media audiences can incorporate media into complex fantasies that can make daily life much more enjoyable.

We began to see this in Radway's (1991) romance novel study, in which the pleasures of the act of reading are taken seriously. The enjoyment that the romances provide and the reasons for seeking such pleasure are connected to the social position of the women readers. Romance novels are enjoyable because reading provides a free space and vicarious fulfillment of the women's romantic fantasies. Indeed, Radway suggests that such mass-mediated pleasures may obviate any need to change the social world. Even so, some women use romance reading as a means of asserting their right to pleasure in a social situation where pleasure is routinely neglected.

Celebrity Games

The world of entertainment celebrity is also connected to questions of pleasure. Who are these famous people, where do they come from, and why are they worthy of our attention? If we look around at contemporary American society, there can be little doubt that these are important questions. How can we explain the national (and international) fascination with the personal lives of the Kardashian sisters, Paris Hilton, or Lindsay Lohan? Why do so many of us pay attention to the details of the lives of actors, musicians, and other media personalities, keeping up with their relationships, weight changes, and hairstyles? What keeps audiences watching ABC's *Dancing With the Stars* where a minor celebrity is paired with a professional dancer, or CBS's *I Get That a Lot*, in which celebrities hide their identities and pull pranks on ordinary Americans, all for a good laugh?

Serious scholars might be inclined to dismiss the celebrity world as meaningless trivia or, worse yet, to sound an alarm about the dangerous distraction that captivates the

American public. This doesn't tell us much about either celebrity or its meaning to audiences. Let's face it—celebrity watching is not confined to a small number of obsessed fanatics. Many people pay some attention to the celebrity scene, whether by reading a newspaper interview with a favorite movie star, watching *Entertainment Tonight*, picking up a copy of *People*, or clicking through TMZ.com. In fact, for the vast majority of Americans who engage, in various ways, with media, the world of entertainment celebrity is likely to be a regular feature.

Joshua Gamson (1994) suggests that celebrity watching is a complex act and that audiences use a range of interpretive strategies in these mass-mediated interactions with the celebrity world. Some audiences essentially believe what they see, take the celebrities at face value, and focus on their great gifts or talents. Others see celebrity as an artificial creation and enjoy the challenge of seeing behind the images, unmasking these celebrity "fictions." Other audiences are what Gamson calls the "game players," who neither embrace the reality of celebrity nor see it as simple artifice but who adopt a playful attitude toward the celebrity world.

This playfulness revolves around two kinds of activities: gossip and detective work. For some, the fun of celebrity comes from the game of gossip. In this game, it does not matter whether celebrities are authentic people or manufactured creations or whether they deserve their fame or not. The fun lies in the playing of the game, and the game is sharing information about celebrity lives. This game of gossip is fun because the truth of each comment is irrelevant; friends can laugh about the bizarre or enjoy evaluating celebrity relationships with the knowledge that there are no consequences.

Other game players focus their energy on detecting the truth about celebrities. This game is animated by the ever-present question of what is real in this world of images, even though the game players are not certain whether they can ever detect the reality. As a result, the fun lies in the collective detective work, not in any final determination of truth or reality. The game itself is the source of pleasure, as players scrutinize celebrity appearances and entertainment magazines, sharing their knowledge with one another as they peel away the never-ending layers of the proverbial onion. Each performance or news item adds to the story, and the detective game continues. The pleasure comes with the speculation, the moments of "aha," and the search for additional information—which the celebrity system produces almost endlessly.

Ultimately, the world of celebrity is a place where the real and the unreal intermingle and where the boundaries between the two are blurred. Game-playing audiences know that the game is located in a "semifictional" world, which makes it both fun and free. Moreover, the pleasure of these games comes from the very triviality of the celebrities themselves. According to Gamson (1994),

> it is the fact that the game-playing celebrity watchers don't really care about the celebrities—contrary to the stereotypical image of the fan who cares so much and so deeply—that makes the games possible and enjoyable. . . . [Celebrities] literally have no power of any kind over audiences. If they did, the "freedom" of the games would be dampened. What matters to celebrity-watching play is that celebrities do not matter. (p. 184)

We see that mass-mediated pleasure can come from a recognition by audiences of media's trivial nature, which makes them perfect sites for fun and games.

Pleasure and Resistance

We have seen that audiences derive pleasure from their use of various forms of mass media. But is there a relationship between the interpretive activity of audiences and their enjoyment? The research in this area has produced a healthy debate but certainly no consensus on the matter. Here we return to the notion of the active audience, which is a requirement for the mediated pleasures we have been discussing. The pleasure of media use comes precisely from interpretive engagement with media texts; media are fun because we actively participate in the making of meaning, not because we simply turn off our brains.

Even if we accept the argument that it is interpretive activity itself that is a source of pleasure, we still need to ask whether all interpretations are equally enjoyable. Does it matter whether we accept the "preferred" meaning or "resist" it? Do both kinds of interpretive strategies result in our having fun? In his study of television, John Fiske (1987) argues that the act of interpretive resistance itself produces pleasure. In this view, the fun of media use and the "popularity" of popular culture are the result of assertions of independence by audiences; the media allow audiences a kind of freedom to understand the world on their own terms. Resistance is fun, we might say, because it empowers those who do not wield power in their daily lives.

While this "pleasure of resistance" view is a provocative hypothesis, we in fact know very little about how widespread such pleasurable resistance actually is. The studies we have identified in this chapter certainly suggest that pleasure and resistance are not necessarily connected. Media use can be fun in situations where audiences are not resisting dominant meanings. Some critics argue that it requires more work to produce oppositional interpretations (Condit 1989). Such interpretations may be a source of great pleasure because of the hard work involved, but this interpretive work may be an obstacle that will prevent many audience members from making oppositional meanings. Interpretive resistance may be fun, but it may also be comparatively rare. Still, the digital media landscape may offer new ways for audiences to enjoy the pleasures of resistance, extending beyond making oppositional interpretations (Ott 2004). It can be amusing to express one's resistance by creating media that makes fun of or criticizes popular media texts—including everything from writing television reviews on a blog and posting comments on celebrity websites to reversioning film scenes by adding a humorous voiceover and making your own music mashup.

We do know that media can be fun, that audiences are active, and that meanings can be variable. If the social positions of audiences and a corresponding set of cultural tools help explain the patterns of interpretation, they may also help clarify the nature of mass-mediated pleasure. Media can be fun because reading or watching offers a space away from the demands of daily life. Feminist media theorists have argued that this is a particularly significant issue for women, whose social roles give them little space. Pleasure can come from entrance into a world of fantasy; here, again, social position shapes the kinds of fantasy

are attractive and the ways audiences engage with fantasy images. Pleasure can also come from asserting autonomy in the face of conformity and from seeing through media in ways that are empowering. More generally, media can be fun because they are a forum for play in a society that values work far above leisure.

Media Fans

One particularly active subset of the media audience consists of those who identify as fans of a particular genre, text, or author. Over the past two decades, scholars have explored the activities and experiences of a wide range of media fans—the practices of "fandom"—developing a specialized subfield within media scholarship of fan studies (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007; Jenkins 2012).

Fan studies emerged in the 1990s as a challenge to the popular stereotype of the fan as a "fanatic," an eccentric or extremist whose obsession makes them different from most media audiences. Rather than dismiss fans for their avid interest, fan studies scholarship has explored the various forms of fan activity, offering a helpful window onto each of the four forms of audience activity we enumerated earlier in this chapter.

First, fans are undoubtedly active interpreters of media, often paying careful attention to the nuances of plot development, character traits, and narrative techniques. Fans typically accumulate substantial knowledge about their favorite media texts, paying attention, for example, to a director's background, a musician's travel experiences, or narrative loose ends from a prequel. In fact, learning background information about a television program, film, musical group, or comic book series is a defining feature of the fan experience—and the depth of knowledge and intensity of commitment is part of what differentiates fans from casual audiences. Fans use their knowledge as an interpretive resource, helping them to make sense of a plot twist, a new sound, or the return of a familiar character. Participating in this interpretive activity, the process of decoding, is often a source of pleasure for media fans, and is often a central part of what makes media fandom fun.

Second, fandom is a social activity. Many fans are active participants in fan communities, which typically offer fans regular opportunities to share their media interests with like-minded others. They can share information about their favorite programs, artists, or film genres, debating the meaning of recent developments and building collective interpretations of the media texts. Fan communities offer a variety of ways for fans to connect, from online discussion forums and Facebook pages to fan newsletters and annual conferences. For example, *Lost* was one of many popular television programs whose fans created a Facebook page to network with each other to share commentary on the program and links to other *Lost*-related websites. SoapOperaFan.com hosts online discussion forums dedicated to each of the major daytime soaps; the *Days of Our Lives* forum has more than 150,000 posts. The Star Wars Chicks website, created by female fans in 1999, includes a detailed timeline of the Star Wars Universe, various Star Wars games, electronic greeting cards, and plenty of fan fiction. Harry Potter enthusiasts can attend any number of conventions—commonly referred to as Cons—hosted by organizations such as The Leaky Cauldron and The Group That Shall Not Be Named. For many fans, some kind of ongoing interaction with other fans is the core activity of the media fan experience.

Third, some fans become activists, participating in collective action aimed at promoting, saving, or changing a particular media form or text. Fans are typically passionate about their chosen media, and they are often connected through shared participation in fan communities. As a result, fans are often already organized and are ready to mobilize in the face of a perceived injustice. Fans have organized campaigns to save television programs slated for cancellation, including an unsuccessful 1999 fan effort to continue the 35-year run of the daytime soap opera *Another World* (Scardaville 2005) and the 2012 campaign that brought the NBC comedy *Community* back for another season. Fans of Nickelodeon's cartoon *Avatar: The Last Airbender* organized a 2009 campaign demanding that the film adaptation include Asian actors. While these fan-activists failed, and the film was made with white actors, the campaign continued as an ongoing effort to promote the casting of Asian Americans and other underrepresented groups in Hollywood films (Lopez 2011). Sometimes fans participate in activist efforts that have no specific connection to their media interests; for example, Lady Gaga has mobilized her fan community in support of marriage equality for gay and lesbian couples. Fan activism has grown more common in recent years, and much of it is not connected to broader efforts promoting political change (Earl and Kimport 2009), but mobilized fans employ a wide range of activist tactics and offer an interesting example of activism rooted in the experiences and preferences of consumers, rather than citizens.

Fourth, fans have long been producers of their own media, and these often serve as valuable resources for building and maintaining connections within fan communities. In the predigital era, fans produced and distributed their own, often photocopied, publications—dubbed fanzines, or just zines—that were full of fan commentary about a specific media form. Many of the most popular zines focused on music, with a rich variety of early zines focused on punk rock in the 1970s and 1980s. Fans of *Star Trek*, one of the first organized fan communities, were pioneers in the development of fan fiction—stories written by fans that extended the story lines of the television programs, often imagining new experiences and challenges for the major characters. Fan fiction has become increasingly popular in the digital age, with online platforms making it easier to produce and distribute fan-authored stories. The website fanfiction.net archives fan fiction associated with anime, movies, comics, television shows, and other media, with a vast library of stories, including more than 300,000 stories about the Japanese anime series *Naruto* and more than 96,000 *Glee* stories. Fan-produced media typically circulate within fan communities, offering dedicated fans an opportunity to express themselves, hone their skills, and build media-based connections with similarly interested fans.

Fans are certainly active audiences. While the intensity of their activity may exceed that of more casual media audiences, they engage in the same forms of audience activity. As new digital media expand the opportunities for audiences to produce their own media, fans are among the most avid creators of amateur media. In this context, it will be helpful to consider briefly how audience experiences are changing with the continuing growth of user-generated media.

From Audience to User

We have seen the diverse forms of audience activity, emphasizing how the active audience challenges long-standing assumptions about passive media consumption. At the same time,

CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the ways in which audiences are active interpreters of media messages. The central contribution of much audience research lies in its interest in individual and collective forms of human agency. The active audience tradition brings real people into focus in media research by exploring the interaction between people and media texts and locating meaning in those interactions.

Although audiences are active, their activity is still subject to a variety of structural constraints. The media messages themselves matter—even if they can have multiple meanings—because they make some interpretations more likely than others. The cultural tools that audiences bring to the interpretation of media are not uniform; different people from different social locations will not have the same resources at their command. By ordering the distribution of cultural tools, social structure serves as a constraint on the process of meaning making.

Audiences, then, are active, but they are not fully autonomous; a sociology of the media needs to be sensitive to both the interpretive agency and the constraints of social structure. Audience research is particularly useful when it clarifies the intersection of agency and structure in the analysis of what media messages mean. Research that compares the interpretive work of audiences from different social locations has been particularly helpful in this regard. But what about the different kinds of media? Do the specific properties of a medium affect this interpretive work? And how substantially do new media disrupt long-standing producer-audience relations? We turn, in Chapter 9, to a consideration of media technology.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How, if at all, do you consider yourself as "active" when you watch television, listen to music, read a book, or browse the web? Are the forms of activity different for different types of media?
2. Do you think social context influences your experience of movie viewing? Why or why not? Consider the similarities and difference in watching a film in a theater, the classroom, on a television screen in a family living room, and on a laptop with headphones.
3. What resources are necessary for individuals to decode media in an oppositional way? Do you think you have ever interpreted media in ways that challenged the preferred reading? Why or why not?
4. In what ways are media fans similar to, or different from, broader media audiences? How, if at all, does the term "user" signify a way of experiencing media that is different from being part of a media audience? What term would you use to describe your own media use?