

Codes and Conventions in Media

- The media construct reality.
- The media have their own forms, codes and conventions.
- The media present ideologies and value messages.
- The media are business that have commercial interests.
- Audiences negotiate meaning in media.

Media mediate reality via the use of recognized codes and conventions, and the credibility or realism of a media text may be judged by the degree to which the audience identifies with what is being portrayed.

Media students identify three categories of codes that may be used to convey meanings in media messages: **technical codes**, which include camera techniques, framing, depth of field, lighting and exposure and juxtaposition; **symbolic codes**, which refer to objects, setting, body language, clothing and colour; and **written codes** in the form of headlines, captions, speech bubbles and language style.

- the media produces meaning by using conventions
- audiences produce meaning from the interaction of the conventional material in the text, and their understanding of conventions
- the conventions that the media uses have a history - they come from somewhere and they are responsive to historical forces
- conventions are not natural but are cultural - they have cultural specificities - they are now somewhat universal - here we can probably think of advertising.
- the systems of codes that make up the convention can be clumped together under three broad headings - technical, symbolic, verbal/written.

By the term 'code' we mean a communication system which contains elements which have an agreed meaning and which can be combined according to agreed rules. This could be the English language, Morse Code, a traffic policeman's hand signals, film etc.

It is a fundamental premise of Communication Studies that all communication takes place via codes:

A code is a rule-governed system of signs, whose rules and conventions are shared amongst members of a culture, and which is used to generate and circulate meanings in and for that culture.

Fiske (1987)

A code must consist of:

- a set of **signs** which carry meaning
- a set of agreed **rules** for combining those signs together

Since it is the case that the codes we use are the result of conventions arrived at by the users of those codes, then it is reasonable to suppose that the **values** of the users will in some way be incorporated into those codes.

They will, for example, have developed signs for those things they agree to be important, they will probably have developed a whole array of signs to draw the distinctions between those things which are of particular significance in their culture.

In other words, you might reasonably expect that the ideologies prevalent in those cultures will have been incorporated into the codes used:

...'reality' is always encoded, or rather the only way we can perceive and make sense of reality is by the codes of our culture. There may be an objective, empiricist reality out there, but there is no universal, objective way of perceiving and making sense of it. What passes for reality in any culture is the product of the culture's codes, so 'reality' is always already encoded, it is never 'raw'.

Fiske 1987

Social Values and Representation

- Social values are the unwritten laws by which a culture lives. They are so transparent that they may exist without us even realising their impact.
- Social values may remain constant across generations and cultures or they may vary.
- Social values are partly based in reality and partly aspirational.
- Social values may or may not reflect people's behaviour but always reflect belief.
- Media products are crafted to suit an audience, they must reflect the basic beliefs and values of the target market or that market will not buy the product.
- Most media texts support dominant social values and as such are a cleverly crafted amalgam of cosy familiarity and fantasy.
- Texts that challenge social values are less common although they proliferate in times of social upheaval and uncertainty.
- Some texts simultaneously support and challenge the values of the time and place of production.

Social Values may be one or more of the following:

- Dominant
- Traditional
- Emerging
- Subcultural
- Oppositional

Further Reading:

Swinburne Home Page http://www.swinburne-senior-sc.edu.vic.gov.au/media_studies_links.html

The Media and Communications Studies Site <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/>