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A 'New' Paradigm?

The feminist research themes discussed in the previous chapter assume a rather straightforward 'sender-message-receiver' sequence in which media are conceived as transmitting particular messages about gender (stereotypes, pornography, ideology) to the wider public. The social control function of the media is central to all three themes, although there are some differences as to how social control is achieved. As far as the 'senders' are concerned, it is sometimes said that 'since those who control the media are almost all (rich) men, there is every incentive for them to present the capitalist, patriarchal scheme of things as the most attractive system available – and to convince the less privileged that the oppression and limitations of their lives are inevitable' (Davies et al., 1987: 2). Other authors point to the immediate producers of media content such as journalists and TV producers and claim that their traditional world views are reflected in media output. Ross Muir (1987: 8), for instance, wonders: 'If a film or television company is a mini sexist society, with women congregated in the lower paid service and support jobs, how can we expect the image of women that they produce to be anything but sexist?' According to such views, an increase in the number of female media producers would be instrumental to creating a more balanced media product (for example, Beasley, 1989).

At the 'receiving' end of the model, in research on stereotypes it is thought that children and adults learn their appropriate gender roles by a process of symbolic reinforcement and correction. For anti-pornography campaigners it is not so much learning which is at stake but imitation; men are feared to imitate the violent sexual behaviour presented to them in pornography. In research on ideology a process of familiarization with dominant ideology is assumed leading finally to its internalization and transformation into common sense.

The differences then between functionalist theories of the media refer primarily to the specific elements of the communication process, but not to how communication works, as Figure 3.1 shows.

	Sender	Process	Message	Process	Effect
Stereotypes	men	distortion	stereotype	socialization	sexism
Pornography	patriarchy	distortion	pornography	imitation	oppression
Ideology	capitalism	distortion	hegemony	familiarization	common sense

Figure 3.1 *Models of communication in feminist media theory*

Several elements of these feminist transmission models have become subject to criticism. Media production, for instance, is neither a straightforward derivative of the malicious intents of capitalist male owners, nor is it merely the product of the sexist inclinations of media professionals. It cannot be seen as a simple black box transmitting the patriarchal, sexist or capitalist values of its producers. As will be elaborated in Chapter 4, it is better characterized by tensions and contradictions between individuals with different professional values and personal opinions, and between conflicting organizational demands such as creativity and innovation on the one hand and the commercial need to be popular among a variety of social groups on the other hand.

Two other elements of the model have been fundamentally reconceptualized, namely 'distortion' and 'socialization'. In this chapter I shall discuss the critiques on these concepts which together provide the building blocks of the cultural studies perspective which will inform the remainder of this book.

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Distortion

'Distortion' is a key concept in many feminist approaches to the media. It is often said that women are underrepresented in media content when compared to the 50 per cent of the population which they constitute. Alternatively, it is argued that in reality many more women work than we get to see or read about in media content. Another argument deals with the definition of femininity presented to us in media content: submission, availability and compliance are characteristics held up as ideals, and consumption is presented as the road to self-fulfilment. Muriel Cantor (1978: 88) complains that public broadcasting in America presents images of women 'that are not representative of women's position in our highly differentiated and complex society'. Likewise, Linda Lazier-Smith accuses the advertising industry of not keeping up with changes in society: 'Although the demographics (the math) has changed dramatically, the attitude (mentality) has not. . . . We seem to be suffering from a cultural lag - our culture's beliefs and attitudes and opinions on women are lagging behind the reality about women' (1989: 258).

It seems indisputable that many aspects of women's lives and experiences are not properly reflected by the media. Many more women work than the media suggest, very few women resemble the '*femmes fatales*' of movies and TV series, and women's desires extend far beyond the hearth and home of traditional women's magazines. The feminist calls for more realistic images of women and definitions of femininity may therefore seem entirely legitimate. In fact, they are problematic. To begin with, stereotypes are not images in themselves but radicalized expressions of a common social practice of identifying and categorizing events, experiences, objects or persons. Stereotypes often have social counterparts which

appear to support and legitimize the stereotype. A common response to the feminist claim that media distort reality by showing women in stereotypical roles of housewives and mother, is that in reality many women are mothers and housewives too, 'and what is so problematic about showing that?'

Feminist alternatives to gender stereotypes are not as univocal as the claim for more realistic representations suggests. Feminists are divided among themselves over what is the reality of women's social position and nature. Thus before the media could transmit more realistic images of women, it would be necessary to define uncontroversially what the reality about women is, obviously an impossible project. As Brunson aptly argues:

For feminists to call for more realistic images of women is to engage in the struggle to define what is meant by 'realistic', rather than to offer easily available 'alternative' images. Arguing for more realistic images is always an argument for the representation of 'your' version of reality. (1988: 149)

At the heart of the matter is the understanding of the 'reality' of gender, which in these theories is sometimes defined as social position, as in cases of calling for a more realistic reflection of women's social roles, and at other times is defined as a particular subjectivity, as in the claims for a more varied representation of women's psychological features. Apparently, in transmission models of communication, gender is conceived as a more or less stable and easily identifiable distinction between women and men which ought to be represented correctly. Such a conceptualization of gender is utterly problematic for it denies the dynamic nature of gender, its historical and cultural specificity and its contradictory meanings. What to make, for instance, of transgressions of the male/female dichotomy, manifested in the ambiguous appearances of Grace Jones, Prince or Michael Jackson; in lesbian and homosexual subcultures; in the phenomenon of transsexuality; and in daily lives and experiences of women and men whose identities belie the thought of an easily identifiable distinction between women and men?

An acknowledgement of the historical specificity of current dominant beliefs about women and men opens up new ways of thinking about gender as constructed. In such approaches 'distortion' would be an empty concept, since there is no reference point as to what the true human, male or female identity consists of, and hence there is no criterion as to what exactly the media should represent. Human identity and gender are thought to be socially constructed, in other words products of circumstances, opportunities and limitations.

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Some views on the meaning of gender

Psychoanalysis is one approach to theorizing the construction of gender. According to Lacanian varieties gender difference is constructed through the acquisition of language in the Oedipal phase, the submission of the self

to the phallogocentric symbolic order in which the feminine is undefined and cannot be spoken. The Chodorowian approach emphasizes the gender-specific symbiosis between mother and children in the pre-Oedipal phase to account for gender difference (cf. Chapter 2). Such arguments tend to attribute almost exclusive explanatory power to the constitution of the self in early childhood and ignore the social forces that bear on the subjectivity of human beings. In its conceptualization of gender as a property that human beings acquire early in life prior to their entry into social relations, psychoanalysis borders on the essentialistic:

For if, as some psychoanalytic theories appear to suggest, social subjects are determined, through family relations and language acquisition, prior to the introduction of other considerations, including race, class, personal background or historical moment, the social construct thus described is a closed system unamenable to other subject formations. (Pribram, 1988: 6)

Other interpretations of gender as construction, for instance those inspired by Gail Rubin's influential theory of the 'sex-gender system', give priority to social relations and consider gender to be shaped within ideological frameworks, as socially constructed by cultural and historical processes and acquired by individuals by socialization through family, education, church, media and other agencies. Although in such an appreciation of gender, its particular meaning might vary according to history and culture, the basic 'sex-gender system', ascribing 'femininity' to biological women and 'masculinity' to biological men, is thought to be universal and all-pervasive (Rubin, 1975). Such notions of gender also perceive the concept as a relatively constant and consistent feature of human identity. 'Ungendered' or multiple and divided subjectivities are hard to envisage, and as in the psychoanalytic view the binary and oppositional character of gender remains, constraining 'feminist critical thought within the conceptual frame of a universal sex opposition . . . which makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to articulate the differences . . . among women or, perhaps more exactly the differences *within women*' (de Lauretis, 1987: 2; italics in original).

The notion of gender I want to advance here concerns gender as a discursive construct and is inspired by poststructuralist thought as expressed, among others, in the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault and the feminist film theory of Theresa de Lauretis. In order to explain this notion properly we need to return to the Lacanian idea that we become subjects through the acquisition of language. In other words, as we are born and raised into this world we learn to think, feel and express ourselves with the linguistic means socially available. Of course we can invent our own words and symbols, but nobody would understand us. Thus language and its historically and culturally specific semantic and thematic combinations in discourses set limits to our experience of ourselves, others and our surroundings: 'language speaks us'. People who have travelled or

migrated to foreign countries and have learned to speak foreign languages will recognize this from experience: sometimes words and concepts common to one language do not have an equivalent in another language. As a result the particular experience connected to that concept is hard to express.

Since we are born into societies that have labelled a particular difference between human beings as woman vs man, and a related difference as feminine vs masculine, we come to think of ourselves in these terms: as being and feeling a man, or being and feeling a woman. Gender, however defined, becomes a seemingly 'natural' or inevitable part of our identity and for that matter often a problematic one. According to Lacan, language not only stipulates sexual difference but also male power. In Lacan's univocal phallogocentric discourse women have no means of expressing themselves; without language they cannot speak their own authentic experience, unless in ways defined by men. Thus, in Lacanian terms, feminine experience can only be defined negatively and women can only think of themselves as being 'not-men' (see Chapter 2).

In poststructuralist theory discourse is never univocal or total, but ambiguous and contradictory; a site of conflict and contestation (cf. Sawicki, 1991). Moreover, gender discourse is not conceived as the only dimension of human identity. Rather, human beings are constituted by the different social practices and discourses in which they are engaged. This is of course similar to the Marxist claim about human nature, although in Marxist theory class is the primary social condition defining a binary human identity of capitalist or worker, whereas poststructuralists speak of multiple discourses that are contradictory between and within themselves. Gender can thus be thought of as a particular discourse, that is, a set of overlapping and often contradictory cultural descriptions and prescriptions referring to sexual difference, which arises from and regulates particular economic, social, political, technological and other non-discursive contexts. Gender is inscribed in the subject along with other discourses, such as those of ethnicity, class, and sexuality. Following Foucault, de Lauretis claims that:

the subject [is] constituted in language, to be sure, though not by sexual difference alone, but rather across languages and cultural representations; a subject engendered in the experience of race and class, as well as sexual relations; a subject therefore not unified but rather multiple, and not so much divided as contradicted. (1987: 2)

Gender should thus be conceived, not as a fixed property of individuals, but as part of an ongoing process by which subjects are constituted, often in paradoxical ways. The identity that emerges is therefore fragmented and dynamic; gender does not determine or exhaust identity. In theory, although hard to imagine in current society, it is even conceivable to be outside gender or to engage in a social practice in which gender discourse is relatively unimportant. Defined as such, gender is an intrinsic part of culture – loosely defined as the production of meaning – and is subject to

continuous discursive struggle and negotiation. This struggle over meaning is not a mere pluralistic 'debate' between equal but contending frames of reference. It is traversed by existing power relations, and by the fact that 'in virtually all cultures whatever is defined as manly, is more highly valued than whatever is thought of as womanly' (Harding, 1987: 18). However, a poststructuralist notion of discourse as a site of contestation implies that the disciplinary power of discourse, prescribing and restricting identities and experiences, can always be resisted and subverted. Dominant male discourse can therefore never be completely overpowering, since by definition there will be resistance and struggle.

To view the role of the media in the construction of gender as a process of distorting the 'true' meaning of gender, as occurs in feminist transmission models of communication, thus ignores the contradictory and contested nature of gender. Before presenting an alternative perspective, first a discussion of another key problem of transmission models is necessary.

Socialization

'Socialization' can refer to the various ways in which individuals become social subjects, although in functionalist theories of the media it usually applies to cognitive and behavioural processes. McQuail (1987: 280) for instance, defines socialization as the 'teaching of established norms and values by ways of symbolic rewards and punishment for different kinds of behaviour', and as 'the learning process whereby we all learn how to behave in certain situations and learn the expectations which go with a given role or status in society'. Defined as such it would appear that socialization takes place mainly in childhood, but socialization can be seen as an ongoing long-term process affecting adults as well.

Socialization has been studied in various ways. A common way of attempting to establish socialization effects is the experimental social psychological approach, where children or adults are exposed to a particular type of media output and subjected to some kind of measurement procedure, such as questionnaires or physical monitoring. The kind of questions posed are whether children's exposure to sexist media content is related to their perception of appropriate gender behaviour, or whether men's exposure to violent pornography leads to hostile fantasies and real aggression against women. The results of these studies are contradictory but show among other things that media effects are mediated by other variables such as age, gender or education. More fundamentally, the causal relation between media exposure and sexist attitudes is unclear since it appears that even at a very early age children have considerable knowledge of 'appropriate' gender behaviour. As discussed in Chapter 2, the direction of the causal relationship between pornography and sexual violence cannot be easily established either (cf. McCormack, 1978; Steeves, 1987).

Experimental research examines short term cognitive or behavioural effects and does not reveal much about the influence of mass media in the long term. There has been very little research carried out in relation to feminist concerns, but some studies of long-term media effects have produced relevant results, especially in the area of cultivation theory. This theory proposes that media and television in particular present a 'pseudo-reality' that is different from the social reality most people experience. People who watch television for hours on end will tend to replace their own social experience with that of television reality, resulting in a 'television view' of the world. Steeves (1987) discusses some cultivation studies which do seem to indicate that heavy viewing correlates with sexist attitudes in children. In studies focused especially on the cultivation effect of soap operas it is reported that 'exposure to soap operas correlates with the belief by viewers that men and women have affairs, get divorced, have illegitimate children, and undergo serious operations and that women are housewives, have abortions and do not work at all' (Steeves, 1987: 104). Cultivation research suffers from similar problems as experimental research: the media 'effect' turns out to be mediated by intervening variables such as education, gender and class and the direction of the effect is problematic. Perhaps a particular worldview causes heavy viewing, instead of being caused by it. Moreover, cultivation theory seems primarily relevant to the United States where daily viewing times of over six hours are very common. In many areas of the world this is materially impossible since national or local television stations only broadcast a few hours a day.

Both experimental and cultivation research conceptualize the audience as a relatively passive aggregate of individuals affected differently by mass media as exposure and background variables diverge. Many feminist analyses of the media phrase the issue as 'what do media do with women', ignoring the cognitive and emotional activities of audiences in making sense of mass media. Audience reaction is conceptualized as a dichotomous activity of accepting sexist messages or rejecting them. Either audiences can accept media output as true to reality, in which case they are successfully socialized, brainwashed by patriarchy or lured into the idea that what they see and read is 'common sense', or they see through the tricks the mass media play on them and reject the sexist, patriarchal, capitalist representation of the world. Obviously, many feminists consider themselves among the latter 'enlightened' women raising themselves 'to the lofty pedestal of having seen the light' (Winship, 1987: 140). A deep gap is constructed between the feminist media critic and the ordinary female audience. Soap operas, romance novels and women's magazines are found particularly objectionable: they are said to create 'a cult of femininity and heterosexual romance' that - since these media are predominantly consumed by women - set the agenda for the female world (cf. Ferguson, 1983).

Such a strong conviction about the value (or rather lack of it) of these media for women's lives, is remarkably similar to patriarchal attitudes of

men who claim to know what is best for women. Dismissing women's genres for their supposedly questionable content carries an implicit rejection of the women who enjoy them. Moreover, it does not allow 'true' feminists to enjoy these genres and condemns them to being 'closet readers', obviously at odds with the feminist mission to acknowledge and gain respect for women's experiences and viewpoints.

More recently, some feminist inquiries have turned the question around and asked 'what do women do with media', allowing for a variety of audience reactions. These studies seem to suggest that women actively and consciously seek particular types of gratification from mass media use. Soap operas, for instance, are said to satisfy the need for emotional release, identification, escape, companionship, information and relaxation (Cantor and Pingree, 1983). Similar gratifications have been found among the readers of women's magazines who derive a feeling of friendship from reading and who are informed, entertained and advised by women's magazines (Wassenaar, 1975). Such a 'uses and gratifications' perspective on media use has advantages over the earlier 'effect models' by raising the question of differential uses and interpretations of media output and in its perception of the audience as active. It is still a somewhat mechanistic functional model, presuming that an individual will recognize her own needs and will seek a rational way to satisfy them. Why it is, for example, that one turns to media instead of other means to satisfy the need for entertainment, information or relaxation remains unclear. More fundamentally, the 'uses and gratifications' approach tends to focus on individual differences, attributing them to differences of personality and psychology and neglecting the social and cultural contexts in which media use takes place (cf. Morley, 1989).

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Communication as ritual

Out of the criticism of the feminist transmission model of communication, the contours of an alternative approach emerge. We need first to take a closer look at the epistemological groundwork of the transmission model before we can arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the alternative. As said, 'reality' is a key term, but the concept itself is given little serious thought. The idea that mass media 'distort' the reality of women's lives gives a clue as to how in these models 'reality' is understood. Apparently, a real world of objects, events, situations and processes is assumed to exist independent of and prior to human perception. This real world is waiting to be measured validly and reliably, as scientists try to do; to be represented accurately and truthfully, as media should do; and to be understood and experienced correctly or mistakenly as ordinary people do. 'There is reality and then after the fact, our account of it' (Carey, 1989: 25). Almost inevitably, media performance will thus only be evaluated in terms of the quality of its representation of reality. There are two problems

to this account, the first having to do with the role of the media in contemporary society, the second with the concept of reality itself.

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The 'bardic' function

In the first place mass media accomplish much more varied activities than only those of representing reality. Film, television, (popular) literature etc. construct an imaginary world that builds on and appeals to individual and social fantasies. Mass media produce and reproduce collective memories, desires, hopes and fears, and thus perform a similar function as myths in earlier centuries. 'The search for the mythical in contemporary society is grounded not only in the plausible expectation that we too perforce must find ways of expressing basic concerns, core values, deep anxieties; and equally we must find ways of expressing publicly and collectively our attempts at resolving them' (Silverstone, 1988: 24). In their presentation of major social events like coronations, sports games or disasters media present the content of myth, and in their familiar and formulaic narratives they resemble mythical story-telling. Whereas myths connect mundane everyday life with the sacred and unreachable words of Gods and ancestors, modern mass media mark the boundary between ordinary daily life and the inaccessible worlds of show business and top sports (cf. Silverstone, 1988). Carey (1989) has labelled such an approach to communication as a ritual view characterized by terms like 'sharing', 'participation', 'fellowship' and 'the possession of a common faith'.

The ritual view on communication borrows its concepts from anthropology and the sociology of religion, and is directed at the way in which a society reproduces its cohesiveness and its shared beliefs. In other words the ritual approach to communication focuses on the construction of a community through rituals, shared histories, beliefs and values. In such a view, media create 'an artificial though none the less real symbolic order that operates to provide not information but confirmation, not to alter attitudes or change minds but to represent an underlying order of things, not to perform functions but to manifest an ongoing and fragile social process' (Carey, 1989: 19). Two concrete examples will clarify the difference between the transmission and ritual models of communication. When investigating church attendance in a particular community, employing a transmission perspective one might inquire about the messages and instructions present in the sermon and the understanding and recollection of the church-goers. From a ritual viewpoint the joint prayer and chant, and of course the ceremony would be more important. Similarly, television news can be construed as a daily presentation of new information that enables people to learn and process new knowledge, while one could also stress its ritual character as a device to structure the evening and as 'the presentation . . . of the familiar and the strange, the reassuring and the threatening' (Silverstone, 1988: 26).

Ritual models may fail to incorporate notions like dominance and

oppression – essential to the feminist and any other critical project – suggesting a more or less pluriform and unproblematic construction of social togetherness. Fiske and Hartley's (1978) proposal to think of the mass media as contemporary bards provides a useful integration of a conception of power with the ritual view of communication. The authors claim that the media perform a social role which is similar to that of the bards in medieval societies. Those poets were licensed and paid by the rulers of their time to mediate between them and the society at large, by writing and performing songs and stories. They did not simply reflect the views of the courts nor those of ordinary people, but they reworked 'raw materials' into meaningful narratives, much as television does today: 'So bardic television cannot by definition simply "reflect" any supposed social or cultural reality that already exists elsewhere, since its main business is to make its own particular kind of sense of the fragmented and conflicting raw materials available to it' (O'Sullivan et al., 1989). That particular sense, however, is firmly connected to the dominant social order, for the bards' task is primarily to render the unfamiliar into the already known, or into 'common sense'. Therefore, the bardic function has inherently reactionary tendencies since it needs to rely on familiar meanings and interpretations. What falls outside an already existing consensus is hard to make sense of, except as 'otherness' or 'deviance'.

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The social construction of reality

The second fundamental problem of the reflection thesis in feminist transmission models of communication has to do with its limited interpretation of reality, conceptualizing it as an independent world of objects, relations and processes only, and ignoring the social processes of defining reality. In their classic treatise *The Social Construction of Reality* Berger and Luckman (1966) claim that society exists as both objective and subjective reality. While we perceive the world we live in as 'real', as something that exists beyond our own perceptions and beliefs and that will continue to exist when we are not there, we acknowledge at the same time that not everyone perceives reality in the same way. Still, it is not merely that people perceive reality in a particular way, their perception has consequences for their sense of self, relations with others, their mode of conduct and a whole range of other social practices. In these social interactions people produce, reproduce and adjust definitions of reality: 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas, 1928: 584). Reality is not merely something that exists 'out there', but it is also (re)constructed by the social and sense-making activities of human beings. According to Berger and Luckman (1966), the most important vehicle in that process is conversation. Not that all conversation pertains to matters of meanings and definition. On the contrary, it is precisely in the ordinary, taken for granted exchanges that reality is reconstructed since everyday conversation requires shared defini-

tions of the situation in order to make sense at all. Language of course is the key element in this process, as a means of both apprehending and reproducing the world. The biblical dictum 'In the beginning was the word' summarizes aptly that language constitutes the world and ourselves (in Carey, 1989: 25).

In the previous chapter, the prerequisite of language for the development of individual subjectivity and sanity was discussed, taking its inspiration from Foucault and Lacan. We can now expand this notion and appreciate that language constitutes society and reality as well. Thus language is not a means of reflecting reality, but the source of reality itself. 'Reality is brought into existence, is produced, by communication – by, in short, the construction, apprehension, and utilization of symbolic forms' (Carey, 1989: 25). This is not to say that there is nothing out there except the images in our head, as a collision with a moving car will prove, but that we can only define the meaning and make sense of that experience through language.

'Language' should not be conceived in the limited sense of grammar and lexicons. The articulation of language in 'discourse', in specific combinations of themes and symbols is at stake here. It is not language itself that constructs reality and subjectivity, but its expression in particular cultural and individual histories, beliefs and value systems, institutional and official jargon, subcultural expressions etc. Moreover, several non-linguistic symbolic forms contribute to the sense making process as well. Foucault (1976), for instance, has identified the dormitory lay-out of eighteenth century boarding schools as a sign of a discourse of sexuality: the presence of partitions and curtains, control of sleeping hours etc. all refer to the need to control children's sexuality. Likewise, Edelman (1964) has pointed to the use of symbols in American politics, with the American flag and the White House for instance referring to discourses of nationalism and presidential power. Through these symbolic forms societies construct their definitions of reality. It is not something an individual does by her or himself, she or he is participating in a profoundly social process, in the sense that social relations are reflected in definitions of reality as well as definitions of reality influencing social relations. The former is easily explained by referring to the processes of interaction between individuals, groups, institutions etc. that shape reality. It is important to realize, however, that these processes are not equally accessible to everyone. The power to define is intricately linked to other power relations in society, such as economic, ethnic, gender and international relations.

As emphasized earlier, dominant discourse is not monolithic and impervious, but produces its own opposition and is open to negotiation. On the other hand, discourse itself is a form of power, since both the process of discourse (the symbolic interactions) and the product of discourse (a particular set of meanings and narratives) limit the possibilities of interpretation and privilege certain meanings above others. To give an example: before the advent of the second wave of the women's

movement, sexual harassment and sexual violence within heterosexual relationships were considered to be excesses of personal idiosyncrasies, and were not seen as criminal acts. The occurrence of sexual violence in the domestic sphere was made invisible by defining it as a problem which some individual women just had to cope with, an unpleasant fact of life. As a result of that definition, there was no possibility for retaliation, nor were there many support facilities. The definition of the issue as a matter of the private sphere prevented its recognition as a social problem and left the women affected without means to talk about and fight against it.

The power of discourse lies not only in its capacity to define what is a social problem, but also in its prescriptions of how an issue should be understood, the legitimate views on it, the legitimacy and deviance of the actors involved, the appropriateness of certain acts etc. This holds not only for dominant discourse, as can be easily appreciated, but also for alternative, insurgent discourse. For instance, Leong (1991) analyses how the moral discourse of radical feminists opposing pornography imposes a 'proper' standard of correct non-violent sexuality on women, and construes women as victims in need of protection.

Given that the whole idea of society, or any other collectivity for that matter, requires discourse (the mapping, description and articulation of situations and processes), which by definition has the effect of excluding, annihilating and delegitimizing certain views and positions, while including others, Foucault's seemingly extreme and hollow dictum that power is everywhere begins to make sense.

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Cultural studies

So far, I have argued that feminist transmission views of communication are unsatisfactory because of their limited conceptualization of gender and communication. With regard to gender, the problem lies mainly in the observation that media distort the 'true' nature of gender, assuming a stable and easily identifiable distinction between women and men. Alternatively, I proposed to construe gender as discourse, a set of overlapping and sometimes contradictory cultural descriptions and prescriptions referring to sexual difference. Such a conceptualization of gender does not deny the possibility of fragmented and multiple subjectivities in and among women (or men for that matter), and allows for difference and variety. The difficulties with the conceptualization of communication primarily concern the 'reflection' and 'socialization' hypothesis. The idea of a reality that media pass on more or less truthfully and successfully, fails at several points: media production is not simply a matter of reflection but entails a complex process of negotiation, processing and reconstruction; media audiences do not simply take in or reject media messages, but use and interpret them according to the logic of their own social, cultural and individual circumstances: media are not only assigned to 'reflect' reality

but represent our collective hopes, fears and fantasies and perform a mythical and ritual function as well; finally, reality itself is not only an objective collection of things and processes, but is socially constructed in discourses that reflect and produce power.

How can these elements be combined into a relatively coherent approach to gender and communication? Defining gender as discourse leads to the question of what 'role' the media play in gender discourse and how that role is realized. De Lauretis (1987: 2) proposes that gender should be thought of as 'the product of various social technologies, such as cinema, and of institutionalized discourses, epistemologies and critical practices, as well as practices of daily life'. Media can thus be seen as (social) technologies of gender, accommodating, modifying, reconstructing and producing disciplining and contradictory cultural outlooks of sexual difference. The relation between gender and communication is therefore primarily a cultural one, a negotiation over meanings and values that inform whole ways of life. This is not to deny the various material aspects of the subject, for instance the underpayment of female broadcasters and the restricted access to mass media of poor and third world women. However, at the heart of the matter is the struggle over the meaning of gender.

How do these technologies of gender operate, or to put it differently, what part do the media play in the ongoing construction of gender discourse? Much depends on their location in economic structures (for example, commercial vs public media), on their specific characteristics (for example, print vs broadcast), on the particular genres (for example, news vs soap opera), on the audiences they appeal to, etc. But obviously all media are central sites at which discursive negotiation over gender takes place. The concept of discursive negotiation applies to all instances of (mass) communication and is visualized in Hall's encoding/decoding model (see Chapter 1). Separately, the elements of production, texts and reception of media make no sense; they are intricately linked in the process of meaning production. At all levels discursive negotiation takes place: the production of media texts is replete with tensions and contradictions resulting from conflicting organizational and professional discourses. For instance, creative personnel such as script writers and directors will be guided mainly by aesthetic aims and personal preferences, while managing directors may have economic and public relations interests predominantly in mind. Through the fragmented production structure meaning is constructed and expressed in the variety of media texts. As a result of the tensions in the 'encoding' process, as Hall calls it, media texts do not constitute a closed ideological system, but 'reflect' the contradictions of production. Media texts thus carry multiple meanings and are open to a range of interpretations, in other words they are inherently 'polysemic'. The thus encoded structures of meaning are brought back into the practices of audiences by their similarly contradictory, but reverse 'decoding' process

While the concept of polysemy thus assumes audiences to be producers of meaning as well – as opposed to being confronted with meaning only, as in a transmission model – the range of meanings a text offers is not infinite, despite its essential ambiguity. ‘Encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate’ (Hall et al., 1980: 135). Thus most texts do offer a ‘preferred reading or meaning’ which, given the economic and ideological location of most media, will tend to reconstruct dominant values.

In the rest of the book I will add to the elements and outline of the cultural studies approach to gender and communication which I have sketched only loosely in this chapter. Such a perspective suggests to the feminist media critic and researcher the following questions:

- How are discourses of gender encoded in media texts?
- Which preferred and alternative meanings of gender are available in media texts and from which discourses do they draw?
- How do audiences use and interpret gendered media texts?
- How does audience reception contribute to the construction of gender at the individual level of identity and subjectivity and at the social level of discourse?
- How can these processes be examined and analysed?

I will discuss each of these moments in the production of (mass mediated) meaning separately in the following chapters.