A CRITICAL REVIEW OF STUART HALL’S ENCODING AND DECODING

INTRODUCTION

Stuart Hall is one of the prominent scholars of the British Cultural Studies also known as the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies. He was one of the early proponents of the audience reception theory and developed encoding/decoding model as an approach to textual analysis, with focus on the scope for negotiation and opposition on the part of the audience. Hall believes that the audience does not simply passively accept a text as the model took a look at ways in which audiences/readers make meaning from texts.

The encoding and decoding model was developed by Hall in an attempt to challenge the long held assumptions on how media messages are produced, circulated and consumed. Hall argued that researchers should direct their attention toward (1) analysis of the social and political context in which content is produced (encoding), and (2) the consumption of media content (decoding). Researchers should not make unwarranted assumptions about either encoding or decoding, but instead should conduct research permitting them to carefully assess the social and political context in which media content is produced and the everyday life context in which it is consumed (Mcquail, 2010).

In contrast to other media theories that disempowered audiences, Hall advanced the idea that audience members can play an active role in decoding messages as they rely on their own social contexts, and might be capable of changing messages themselves through collective action. In simpler terms, Encoding/decoding is the translation of a message that is easily understood. When you decode a message, you are extracting the meaning of that message into terms that you are able to easily understand. Decoding has both verbal and non-verbal forms through communication. Decoding behavior without using words would be observing body language (Hall, Durham and Kellner, 2001).

Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding model of communication basically explains that meaning is encoded by the sender and decoded by the receiver and that these encoded meanings may be decoded to mean something else. That is to say, the senders encode meaning in their messages according to their ideals and views and the messages are decoded by the receivers according to
their own ideals and views, which may lead to miscommunication or to the receiver understanding something very different from what the sender intended (Hall, 1993).

**Encoding/Decoding as Propounded by Stuart Hall**

Hall, in his essay criticized the traditional model of communication for its linearity-sender/message/receiver and for its concentration on the level of message exchange, absence of structured conception of the different moments as a complex structure of relations. He then postulated that the process of communication may be more complex than the idea in the traditional model when all the elements or structures of communication are taken into account. He therefore came up with a four stage model of communication which includes the production, circulation, distribution/consumption and reproduction. He sees each of these steps as both autonomous and interdependent.

Hall further compared the model with the homologous approach that forms the structure of commodity production found in Karl Mark’s capitalism and says it has an added advantage of bringing out more sharply how a continuous circuit – production – distribution – reproduction can be sustained through a passage of forms. He explains that the approach in Karl Marx’s capitalism highlights the specificity of forms in which the product of the process appears in each moment thereby distinguishing ‘discursive’ production from other types of production in the society as well as in modern media systems. These four stages in Hall (1980) model are explained thus;

**Production** – This is where the encoding or the construction of a message begins. Production process has its own "discursive" aspect, as it is also framed by meanings and ideas; by drawing upon society's dominant ideologies, the creator of the message is feeding off of society's beliefs, and values. Numerous factors are involved in the production process. On one hand "knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience form the "production structures of the television. On the other hand, topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, definitions of the situation' from other sources and other discursive formations form the other part of wider socio-cultural and political structure.
**Circulation** – This has to do with how individuals perceive things; visual vs. written. How things are circulated influences how audience members will receive the message and put it to use. According to Philip Elliott the audience is both the "source" and the "receiver" of the television message. For example, circulation and reception of a media message are incorporated in the production process through numerous "feedbacks." So circulation and perception, although not identical, are certainly related to and involved into the production process.

**Use (distribution or consumption)** – For a message to be successfully "realized", "the broadcasting structures must yield encoded messages in the form of a meaningful discourse. This means that the message has to be adopted as a meaningful discourse and it has to be meaningfully decoded. However, the decoding/interpreting of a message requires active recipients.

**Reproduction** – This stage is directly after audience members have interpreted a message in their own way based on their experiences and beliefs. The decoded meanings are the ones with "an effect" (e.g. influence, instruct, entertain) with "very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioral consequences. What is done with the message after it has been interpreted is where this stage comes in. At this point, you will see whether individuals take action after they have been exposed to a specific message.

According to the author, Meanings and messages in the discursive production are organized through the operation of codes within the rules of language or any form of communication. Each stage will affect the message (or product) being conveyed as a result of its 'discursive form' (e.g. practices, instruments, relations). Therefore, once the discourse is accomplished, it must be translated into social practices in order to be completed and effective – “If no 'meaning' is taken, there can be no 'consumption'." Each of these steps helps defines the one that follows, while remaining clearly distinct (Hall, 1980). Thus, even though each of these moments (stages) is equally important to the process as a whole, they do not completely ensure that the following moment will necessary happen. Each can constitute its own break or interruption of the 'passage of forms' on whose continuity the flow of effective production (i.e. reproduction) depends.
Since discursive form plays such an important role in a communicative process, Hall suggests that "encoding" and "decoding" are "determinate moments. What he means by that is that an event, for example, cannot be transmitted in its "raw format." A person would have to be physically at the place of the event to see it in such format. Rather, he states that events can only be transported to the audience in the audio-visual forms of televisual discourse (that is, the message goes to processes of production and distribution). This is when the other determinant moment begins – decoding, or interpretation of the images and messages through a wider social, cultural, and political cognitive spectrum (that is, the processes of consumption and reproduction). The event must become a 'story' before it can become a communicative event.

In trying to characterize television communicative process, he said that the institutional structures of broadcasting, with their practices and networks of production, their organized relations and technical infrastructures, are required to produce a programme. Production, here, constructs the message. In one sense, then, the circuit begins here. Of course, the production process is not without its 'discursive' aspect: it, too, is framed throughout by meanings and ideas: knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience and so on frame the constitution of the programme through this production structure. Further he maintains that, though the production structures of television originate the television discourse, they do not constitute a closed system. They draw topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, 'definitions of the situation from other sources and other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part. This he said has been expressed succinctly by Philip Elliott within a more traditional framework, in his discussion of the way in which the audience is both the 'source' and the 'receiver' of the television message.

Borrowing from Marx's terms, Hall said that circulation and reception are, indeed, 'moments' of the production process in television and are reincorporated through a number of skewed and structured 'feedbacks', into the production process itself. The consumption or reception of the television message is thus also itself a 'moment' of the production process in its larger sense, though the latter is 'predominant' because it is the 'point of departure for the realization' of the
message. Production and reception of the television message are not, therefore, identical, but they are related: they are differentiated moments within the totality formed by the social relations of the communicative process as a whole.

He noted that the broadcasting structures must yield to encoded messages in the form of a meaningful discourse at a certain point thereby making the institution-societal relations of production to pass under the discursive rules of language for its product to be realized. This he said initiates a further differentiated moment, in which the formal rules of discourse and language are in dominance. “Before this message can have an 'effect (however defined), satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use', it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded, he said. It is this set of decoded meanings which 'have an effect', influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences. In a 'determinate' moment the structure employs a code and yields a 'message': at another determinate moment the 'message', via its decoding, issues into the structure of social practices. We are now fully aware that this reentry into the practices of audience reception and 'use' cannot be understood in simple behavioural terms. The typical processes identified in positivistic research on isolated elements - effects, uses, 'gratifications' - are themselves framed by structures of understanding, as well as being produced by social and economic relations, which shape their 'realizationi at the reception end of the chain and which permit the meanings signified in the discourse to be transposed into practice or consciousness (to acquire social use value or political effectivity).

Referring to the diagram representing the circuit in the communication model, Hall stressed that there may be difference between the intended meaning and the interpreted meaning of the message in question as the codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical and that the degrees of 'understanding' and 'misunderstanding' in the communicative exchange - depend on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry; meaning the relations of equivalence established between the positions of the 'personifications', encoder-producer and decoder-receiver. He however stated that the situation in turn depends on the degrees of identity/non-identity between the codes which perfectly or imperfectly transmit, interrupt or systematically distorts what has been transmitted.
He contends that the “lack of fit between the codes” has much to do with the “structural differences of relation and position between broadcasters and audiences” as well as the “asymmetry between the codes of ‘source’ and ‘receiver’ at the moment of transformation into and out of the discursive form”. The so-called “‘distortions’ or ‘misunderstandings’ arise precisely from the lack of equivalence between the two sides in the communicative exchange, he said.

Hall also argued that there is some ground for thinking that a new and exciting phase in so-called audience research, of a quite new kind, may be opening up. He said that at either end of the communicative chain the use of the semiotic paradigm promises to dispel the lingering behaviourism which has dogged mass-media research for so long, especially in its approach to content. This he said is the feeling despite the fact that television programme is not a behavioural input, like a tap on the knee cap, yet it seems to have been almost impossible for traditional researchers to conceptualize the communicative process without lapsing into one or other variant of low flying behaviourism. He therefore cited Gerbner’s study on Television violence in which he remarked that representations of violence on the TV screen 'are not violence but messages about violence': but scholars have continued to research the question of violence, as if they were unable to comprehend this epistemological distinction.

Based on this, he postulates that the televisual sign is a complex one. It is usually constituted by the combination of two types of discourse, visual and aural. Moreover, it is an iconic sign, in Peirce's terminology, because ‘it possesses some of the properties of the thing represented which is a point which has led to a great deal of confusion and has provided the site of intense controversy in the study of visual language. Because of this, he said that since the visual discourse translates a three-dimensional world into two-dimensional planes, it cannot of course be the referent or concept it signifies. He pointed out that some codes are widely distributed in a community or culture and for that they can be learned at early age. He equally used visual representation for animal to demonstrate his point of view.

While trying to clarify the confusion in current linguistic theory, Hall zeroes in on the distinction between connotation and denotation. He equated denotation with literal meaning of a sign while referring to connotation as less fixed and therefore more conventionalized and changeable,
associative meanings, which clearly vary from instance to instance and therefore, must depend on the intervention of code. He further stressed on the importance of differentiating between denotation and connotation, warning that denotative or 'literal' meaning is not “outside ideology rather, its “ideological value is strongly fixed - because it has become so fully universal and 'natural. He equally explained that the level of connotation of visual sign is the point where “already coded signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional, more active ideological dimensions.

To further explain how misunderstandings come about in all kinds of literal works, Hall came up with three “hypothetical positions from which decodings of a televisual discourse may be constructed”. They are;

**Dominant/Hegemonic Position** – This position which hall describes as the typical case of perfectly transparent communication is when the audience takes the connoted meaning of communication, like in a television newscast or a current affair program full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded. He went further to say that the dominant position is hegemonic because they represent the definition of situations or events which are in dominance.

**Negotiated Position** – this position Hall says contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules – it operates with exceptions to the rule. What this means is that people may understand the dominant position and believe the position, but are in a situation where they must make up their own separate rules to coexist with the dominant position.

**Oppositional Position** – this happens when the viewer perfectly understands both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a globally contrary way. Hall explains that this kind of position happen mainly in political moments like during crisis period when events which are normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading.
What other Scholars said about Encoding/Decoding

Despite providing an insight into audience reception research, Hall’s encoding and decoding model has faced criticism from other scholars. While some criticized the model for basing its framework on assumption that the latent meaning is encoded in a dominant position, others raised a question of how a 'preferred reading' can be established. One of such critics, Shaun Moores raised the following questions about the model, “Where is it and how do we know if we've found it? Can we be sure we didn't put it there ourselves while we were looking? And can it be found by examining any sort of text?” (Moores, 1993).

A student and colleague of Hall who applied Hall’s insight in his studies, David Morley also wondered whether it might be the 'reading which the analyst is predicting that most members of the audience will produce' (Morley, 1981). Morley also discusses the problem of understanding the concept of ‘oppositional reading, noting that there might be confusion between referring ‘oppositional reading’ to rejecting the preferred meaning (dominant ideology) and to disagreement with the text. He argued that the study has some unsolved problems (Morley, 2006).

He therefore suggests that in the decoding stage there is a need to distinguish comprehension of the text and its evaluation. Comprehension here refers to the reader's understanding of the text in the basic sense and the sender's intention, and to possible readers’ interpretations of the text while evaluation is how readers relate the text to the ideological position (Schroder, 2000)

Ross (2011) while suggesting ways that Hall's typology of the Encoding/Decoding Model can be modified, came up with a more complex typology consisting of nine combinations of encoding and decoding positions. The expanded version he explained does not imply replacing the original model but rather to let the model work in a new way. He also concurs with David Morley that the model has some unsolved problems.

John Corner is equally of the view that it is not easy to find actual examples of media texts in which one reading is preferred within a plurality of possible readings (Corner, 1983) while Justin Wren-Lewis says that 'the fact that many decoders will come up with the same reading does not make that meaning an essential part of the text' (Wren-Lewis 1983).
Another scholar, Kathy Myers notes that in the spirit of a post-structuralist social semiotics, that 'it can be misleading to search for the determinations of a preferred reading solely within the form and structure' of the text (Myers, 1983). She adds that in the context of advertising, there is a danger in the analysis of advertising by assuming that it is in the interests of advertisers to create one 'preferred' reading of the advertisement's message. Intentionality suggests conscious manipulation and organization of texts and images, and implies that the visual, technical and linguistic strategies work together to secure one preferred reading of an advertisement to the exclusion of others, she said. She further states that the openness of connotative codes may mean that we have to replace the notion of 'preferred reading' with another which admits a range of possible alternatives open to the audience (Myers, 1983).

Despite the criticism, many scholars and theorists have however applied Hall’s encoding/decoding model in their studies especially in areas of cultural studies and audience reception. Popular among them is David Morley who employed it in his studies of how different social groups interpreted a television programme (Morley 1980).

Also Jonathan Potter, cited in Grayson (1998) is part of the symbolic capital of members of the relevant 'interpretative community' and constitutes the textual and interpretative codes available to them which offer them the potential to understand and sometimes also to produce texts which employ them. David Mick also applied it in his research in the field of advertising (Mick & Politi, 1989)

Fiske (1987) also supports the view of Hall that audiences are not merely passive watchers of the television screen, but rather are active audiences, engaging with the program in ways the producers never could imagine. It is through actions, such as fan fiction, fan videos, fan communities, and active campaigning for change on screen that audiences not only absorb the meaning of the text in question, but actively engage with it (Fiske, 1987). Fiske made this remark while discussing the popularity of Dynasty in the late 1980s; a show so popular that there would often be parties where people would have dinner and then watch Dynasty together.

Radway (1984) applied the model in her feminist reception study of popular romance novels in which she found that Romance readers rejected the preferred reading and instead engaged in negotiated or oppositional decoding. Thus romance reading could be interpreted as a form of
passive resistance against male-dominated culture. Similar interpretations were offered by British research on viewers of soap operas on their decoding of program content (Brunsdon and Morley, 1981; Hobson, 1982; Lovell, 1981).

CONCLUSION

Having critically examined Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding study and the views of other scholars about the model, I wish to state that the work has more merits than shortcomings. It challenges the predominant methodologies of empirical social scientific audience research and also the humanistic studies of contents because both fail to take account of the ‘power of the audience ‘in giving meaning to messages (Baran and Davies, 2010).

Most audience studies at the time Hall developed this model seem to focus on the effect the media have on the audience. Most researchers applied quantitative approach to such studies. However, Hall’s encoding/decoding model brought a new approach to audience studies by using qualitative strategies to probe into how audiences read and interpret media contents. This not only proves that mass media audiences are active audience but are group of people who are media literates and capable of making meaning out of media contents according to their predispositions, ideologies and preferences.

The model is also a contribution to limited media effect studies except that it took a different direction to the study by empowering the audiences, making them appear as the determinant of effects and not necessarily the mass media. It is equally an eye opener to media planners, content producers and advertisers who traditionally believes that their media contents will always bring about intended, expected effect on the audience. Hall has proved that these effects all depend on the position from which the audiences decide to decode the encoded messages. This explains why most adverts, political campaigns and behavior change campaigns fail to yield the anticipated results and sometimes work in the oppositional direction.