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Using Social Scientific Criteria to Evaluate Cultural Theories: Encoding/Decoding Evaluated

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Abstract: This article transcends the issue of conflicting theoretical schools of thought to formulate a method of social scientific style theory evaluation for cultural studies. It is suggested that positivist social scientific models of theory critique can be used to assess cultural models of communication to determine if they should be classified as theories. A set of evaluation criteria is formulated as a guide and applied to Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding to determine if it is a theory. Conclusions find the sharing of criteria between schools of thought is judicious, Encoding/Decoding fits the established criteria, and Encoding/Decoding should be referred to as a theory.

Keywords: Theory Evaluation, Criteria of Theory, Cultural Studies**,** Stuart Hall, Encoding/Decoding

Introduction

In *The End of Mass Communication?*, Chaffee and Metzger (2001) suggest that new media will change our notions of mass communication and, as a result, the theories used in communication research. In more recent years, these types of implications about the rise of new media technologies, their role in society, and their influence on existing structures and industries have become increasingly ubiquitous. In this same spirit of capitalizing on the changes occurring in our modern era to re-evaluate existing ideas, this article suggest that, in addition to changing our notions of the theories we use, it might also be prudent to reconsider the methods used to label cultural theories as theories. When answering the question "what is a theory?" each school of thought provides different answers. For example, scientific theories have goals of explanation, prediction and control and scientists suggest that ideas supported by empirical data become a set of "laws" or theory after being evaluated according to existing

sets of criteria. (Reynolds 1971). Contrastingly, cultural theorists' goals are to reveal systems of oppression in social structures and examine their underlying values, attitudes and beliefs. They have no set of criteria to determine what ideas should be labeled as theories. Cultural theories do not become "laws," but they more simply provide an abstract understanding of some communication process (Miller 2002). Despite these contradictory assumptions, it would benefit all parties to share tools or methods that can move us forward towards achieving our collective goals of answering questions about how and why things work.

To demonstrate how the different approaches used by these schools of thought can be bridged and how concepts can be mutually beneficial despite different epistemological and ontological assumptions, one set of scientific criteria will be modified and used as a sample method of determining if a cultural theory should be called a "theory." The theory selected for this purpose is Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding. This theory was chosen for several reasons. First, Hall's ideas are the foundation for the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies. Showing how this process can work with such an important theory will demonstrate the processes usefulness for other ideas. There has also been no consensus on how to label his concepts about the semiotics of meaning-making in media. Although I have just referred to Hall's work as a theory, his ideas have been referred to by many names including a "model," "theory," "process," "Hall's Theory," or simply "encoding/decoding." These multiple forms of reference are a result of a lack of clear criteria for defining cultural theories as "theories" and for this reason, no process to determine how Hall's ideas should be labeled. Finally, using a four-decade-old theory demonstrates how the method presented here can be used to evaluate a theory of any age. A brief evolution of media theories is first presented to situate the innovative variations in thought provided by Hall's ideas. A review of the concepts presented is followed by examples of how the approach has been put to use. Next, the criteria for evaluating a theory are provided, defined and put to use evaluating Hall's ideas. This assessment concludes that Encoding/Decoding fits the established criteria of a theory and should be referred to as such.

Evolution of Media Theories

This brief review provides a foundation of theoretical thoughts key to understanding what led up to Stuart Hall's development of Encoding/Decoding.

Arising during the late nineteenth century, early media theories developed in an historical context, often referred to as the era of mass society, when industrialization was on the rise and societies were transitioning from predominantly agrarian lifestyles to a more commercially centered industrialized structure based around the growth of large cities. The transformations of the industrial era were far more than economic, giving rise to changes in every aspect of daily life, including social structures and interpersonal interactions.

German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies described one result of this transformation, introducing the dichotomous concepts of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. These concepts explained the breakdown in society where "people were bound together by personal, traditional, and communal ties which characterize social relations" (*Geimeinschaft*) into a society where "personal relations are anonymous, impersonal and isolated" (*Gesellschaft*) (Williams 2003: 25). This disconnect from traditional family structures and interpersonal relationships was believed to leave people "atomized and exposed to external influences, and especially to the pressure of mass propaganda of powerful leaders, the most effective agency of which was the mass media" (Morley 1992: 41). The rise of Adolf Hitler and Fascism occurred during a period of concern within German society about this transition from

Geimeinschaft to *Gesellschaft*. Hitler capitalized on the perceived vulnerability of the population through his use of propaganda to promote his messages and recruit followers.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, mass communication researchers such as Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, Denis McQuail and Michael Gurevich, building upon earlier research in the 1940s by Herta Herzog, developed an innovative type of active audience-based theory that they referred to as the "uses and gratifications" approach (Lull 1998). This approach operated on three basic assumptions; people are active users of media, people know why they use the media and can explain these reasons, and there are common patterns to media consumption among users (Williams 2003: 177). Stuart Hall and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham built upon several aspects of the uses and gratifications model such as focusing on audiences as active users and understanding how people experience media content in different ways. This focus on users by concentrating upon audience-based research was the antithesis of the top-down critical theory of Frankfurt School researchers that emphasized the imposition of cultural ideologies by the hegemonic media industries and positioned the audience as passive and vulnerable. Cultural studies found its audience-based niche as it highlighted how media audiences interpreted messages, focusing on the needs of the audience in relation to the messages and exploring the "openness" of audience members to receiving messages as well as their reasons for media use (Morley and Brunsdon 1999). This marked a significant paradigm shift from investigating how the media influenced people to how people used media.

Another major influence on Hall was the development of the structuralist school of thought, represented by the works of anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, whose application of semiological models developed by Ferdinand de Saussure (and the American semiotics of Charles S. Peirce) to an analysis of cultural phenomena such as kinship, ritual and religious life had a profound effect on continental thought across disciplines. Hall's very use of semiotic concepts places his work squarely in the lineage of semiotics, influenced perhaps even more directly by the post-structuralist semiotic philosophies of Roland Barthes. Barthes significantly expanded the application of semiotic principles from the realm of language to encompass visual encoding of meaning as well; Barthes also married the seemingly oppositional approaches of semiotics-structuralism with the post-Marxist paradigms of the Frankfurt School concerning the way hegemonic ideologies become encoded into mass media. This marriage would also serve as the basis for Hall's work, which became the foundation for the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies. Drawing upon Barthes, whose work examined symbols and culture from a Marxist perspective, Hall sought to explain the relationship between the producers of messages, the messages themselves and audiences. 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)" (Baran and Davis 2012: 257). This led to the publication of his ideas about the semiotics of meaning-making in media, first elaborated in his 1973 article *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* but more widely known and studied as a subsequently published 1980 edited extract entitled *Encoding/Decoding*.


What is Encoding/Decoding?

In 1973, Hall was motivated to develop his model of encoding and decoding mediated messages as a "reaction against a tradition of Marxist film criticism found in the film journal *Screen*" (Baran and Davis 2012). He viewed *Screen's* approach as cultural elitism by which movies were presented in support of the status quo of society. However, Hall believed that cases existed by which movies did the opposite and instead challenged the status quo; as a

result, audiences did not always interpret the messages in the ways intended by the producers. Hall viewed the communication process as more complex than the Shannon and Weaver transmission model centered on the idea of communication as a "transmission of signals or messages over distance for the purpose of control" and was defined by terms such as "imparting," "sending," "transmitting," and "giving information to others" (Carey 1989: 15). To Hall, communication was a process of "linked but distinctive moments – production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction" (Hall 1980). Although each of these is a distinctive practice, together they form a "complex structure in dominance" (Hall 1980: 128). This describes "the relationship between the producer of the media text and the consumer" (Davis 2004: 60).

Message intent and dominance are important aspects of Hall's ideas. Arguing from a Marxist perspective, he argued that through the media, the dominant and most powerful factions of society imposed their ideological values. Therefore, he believed "research should be concerned with the 'ideological effects' of the media; on how the media are used to promote or reinforce a particular set of dominant values and how successful they are in doing this" (Williams 2003: 195). In other words, the very process of media production involves encoding meanings and messages in every aspect of content that the audiences must necessarily interpret. Hall argued that existing media theories and models did not grant audience members with enough agency concerning this interpretive process, perceiving audiences as passive instead of active recipients of messages. Hall argued that scholars must acknowledged that there is activity at both levels if we are to understand the relationship between media producers and media receivers (Davis 2004). Producers communicate messages based on assumptions of shared understandings, while audiences decode the content according to their own norms. Media messages are symbols and symbolic vehicles that create meaning because "if no 'meaning' is taken, there can be no 'consumption.' If the meaning is not articulated in practice, it has no effect" (Hall 1980). These symbols (verbal, visual and other culturally specified codes) become the vehicles for passing meaning-loaded messages from sender to receiver at different moments in the process.

When applied to the medium of television, this model commences with the production process. This is where the messages, which later become content to be distributed, are created and encoded. The encoding, or reproduction of ideologies in the production process, is not necessarily overt and can be done at an unconscious level (Hall 1980). What this means is that the producers are not always consciously aware of every nuance they may be encoding, since the very nature of filmic communication captures meanings encoded into the mise-en-scène (the setting, the lighting, the choices of costumes and wardrobe, the casting, the body language and gestures and vocal intonation of the actors) as well as the cinematography (camera angles, movements, styles) and editing choices. The influences on what these messages say come from institutional constraints on the production process, professional codes and practices as well as the influence of those people in control attempting to promote their ideologies (Williams 2003). Although multiple meanings may be encoded within each text, Hall refers to the one dominant ideological message intended by the producers as the preferred meaning; this would be the interpretation shared by the majority of the audience. Since these messages are transmitted through symbols, the audience actively works to decode them. As Hall's schematic (Fig 1.) describes, frameworks of knowledge, relations of production and technical infrastructure make up meaning structures that are encoded within television programs. These programs then act as sites of meaningful discourse; here, in the process of viewing and interpreting, the audience members decoded the previously encoded meaning structures into their own, new meaning structures. The decoder also utilizes their own personal and cultural frameworks of knowledge, relations of production and technical infrastructures to interpret meaning.

Figure 1: Message appropriation in (Hall 1980)
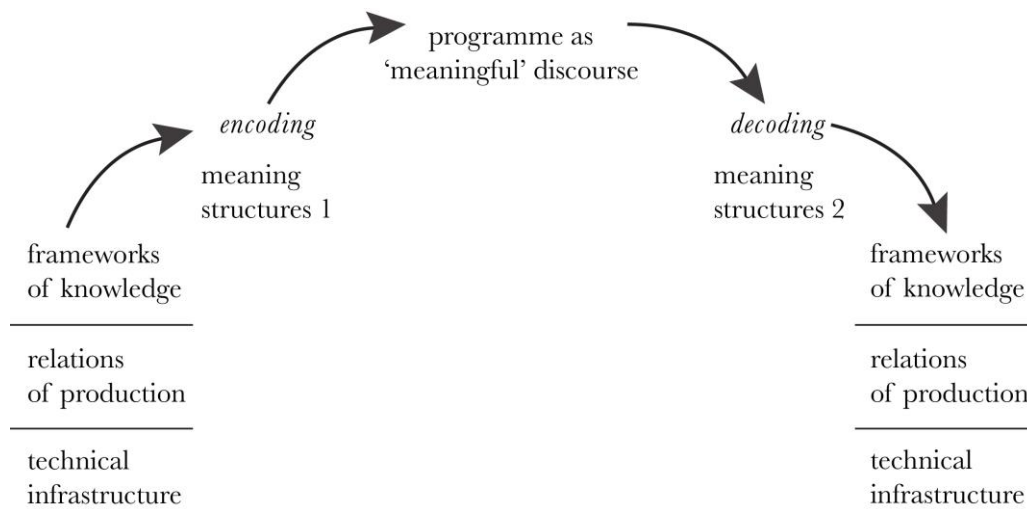
It is at this point that Hall's model presents its largest deviation in concepts from previous semiotics models of communication. Clearly influenced by Antonio Gramsci's theories of hegemony and resistance, Hall acknowledges the cultural politics of interpretation in his use of differentiated ways of "reading" a media text (using the literary metaphor of reading-as-interpretation borrowed from Barthes). Despite the fact that a preferred or hegemonic ideological meaning may be encoded in each text (in our example, a television program), Hall distinguishes between three distinct approaches to decoding the messages, which he labels as dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings. A dominant (i.e., preferred) reading would be an unconditional acceptance of the preferred meaning, through which process the product is interpreted as the producer intended and the viewer accepts the message at face value, with no critical analysis of the media in this type of content reading. However, Hall provides for two other approaches to interpreting meaning. An oppositional interpretation occurs when the individual viewer decodes the text according to his or her own cultural influences; in this case, the preferred ideological meaning may be understood but not accepted or agreed upon by the viewer. In fact, the viewer may interpret the message in a hostile or comical way, finding its very premise to be untenable. Hall's third approach is a negotiated reading, which is a hybrid of sorts: the audience member will understand and partially embrace the preferred meaning but may feel conflicted about some aspects of that interpretations; therefore, instead of completely rejecting it, the interpreter will find a way to negotiate or change its meaning to more closely suit his or her needs (Kropp 2011).

While Hall's model has face validity, making sense on the surface, it was only hypothetical, as he never provided any empirical evidence to support his claims.   Fortunately, since Hall first introduced Encoding/Decoding, many studies of both the process of encoding and the process of decoding television have tested these ideas.

Use of Encoding/Decoding

Over the past four decades, many researchers have applied Encoding/Decoding concepts to an analysis of television, film, and other forms of cultural expression. The table located in the Appendix section identifies exemplars these studies. Listed chronologically, the table identifies the use, focus, method and findings of each study. This list represents a compilation

of well-known and often cited projects, smaller projects with unique findings, multiple methods (textual analysis, focus group discussions, observation, letters, questionnaires, interviews) and various areas of focus (gender, class, culture, age, race, religion).

The largest of these studies was David Morley's and Charlotte Brunsdon's 1978 textual analysis of the BBC evening news magazine program *Nationwide* and a later audience experiment completed by Morley. The researchers examined the program to uncover the preferred meaning presented by the show's producers, or what the researchers interpreted to be the encoded messages. *Nationwide* was chosen for this study "because an earlier analysis had identified it as a program that routinely offered status quo explanations for social issues" (Baran and Davis 2012: 258). For the experimental study, Morley recruited a group of individuals to watch the show. The viewing was followed by a group discussion through which the researcher sought to determine how each viewer decoded the show. Morley, a former student of Hall's, followed the path of thought that economic class was a major determinant in understanding how viewers would decode a program. His findings were mixed. Consistent with Hall's hypothesis that viewers are active and that different groups of people decode messages in different ways. Morley found that the viewers in his study could be placed into all three of Hall's categories -- dominant, negotiated and oppositional -- and that category placement correlated with socioeconomic class. Those with dominant readings were mostly upper class white-collar workers. Middle-class, blue-collar workers and university students performed negotiated readings, while black students and trade union activists decoded the show as oppositional readings. These findings were summarized by Morley (1981), who stated, "Members of a given sub-culture will tend to share a cultural orientation towards decoding messages in particular ways. Their individual 'readings' of messages will be framed by shared cultural formations and practices" (51).

Inconsistent with Hall's model, however, Morley also found that although class could anticipate decoding most of the time, it was not true all of the time and, for this reason, the relationship between the two variables was not causal. This showed that there were other variables that came into play including a person's ability or motivation to decode a message.

Morley's study had limitations. Researchers who deconstructed the *Nationwide* study like Justin Wren-Lewis (1983) and Sujeong Kim (2004) have raised issues with the study's methodologies, conceptualizations of the encoders, the reliance on cultural stereotypes and the lack of inclusion of other social factors beyond class to name a few. Kim also argues that Morley may have underestimated his findings on the importance of socio-economic class and its influence on the decoding process. Despite some criticisms of Morley's study, however, it is considered one of the most influential investigations of audience reception. It served as an important precedent for other researchers, showing how Hall's concepts of Encoding/Decoding might be applied to television programs and test for the relationship between reception and social factors. Several of the better-known studies since *Nationwide* include Dorothy Hobson's *Crossroads – The Drama of a Soap Opera (1982)*, Tania Modleski's examination of soap operas in *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women (1982)*, Ien Ang's *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination (1985)*, and Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis' *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream (1992)*. These projects of varying size, depth, and focus apply the ideas presented in Encoding/Decoding to different television texts as they reinforce and expand upon Hall's concepts.

Another significant study that furthered Hall's concepts was when Katz and Liebes (1990) used Hall's Encoding/Decoding model to study the American television series *Dallas* from an international perspective to understand how a show produced and encoded in one country might be decoded differently in another country. Their study consisted of fifty-five small groups, located in both the United States and Israel, each of which viewed and discussed the

show. They discovered differences in how members of dissimilar cultures decoded the messages within the programs. One important aspect of this study is the linking of ideas such as cultural imperialism to the process of Encoding/Decoding. While Israeli groups found the show to be a reflection of America, the Russian participants believed the content was not simply a reflection but a manipulation; they decoded the messages about American life as propaganda about American values.

In another Encoding/Decoding study, Evan Cooper's analysis of *Will and Grace* (2003) focused on how heterosexual audience members received the shows gay humor, characters and themes. Cooper argues that the show is encoded with indicators of gay culture. These indicators occur in the show's "plot lines, pacing, stylistic conventions, character 'types', insular upper-middle class environs and, of course, gay sensibility" (Cooper 2003: 517). Although not expressly stated, Cooper argues that heterosexual viewers of this show will decode the content in a negotiated manner--viewers will enjoy the entertainment provided by some of the gay cultural indicators, such as the character Jack's humor, but they will fail to identify with him. Additionally, Cooper believes the viewers' gender will cause differences in decoding whereas the males will be more critical of gay characters alternative sexuality than female characters. The twenty-five college students used for this project watched a representative sample of the show, then participants were asked to complete questionnaires after viewing. Results indicated that viewers consumed the messages within the show in a negotiated manner, finding both consistencies and differences between hypothesized perceptions and results. Despite some criticisms in sampling and methodology utilized in this study, it serves as a good example of how researchers have put Hall's Encoding/Decoding to use.

In a final example, Susan Thomas's (2010) study addressed both encoding and decoding on the television show *What Not to Wear*. She focused on the encoded message of materialism and the message that consumption of products can improve the viewer's life and lead to increased happiness, which she found was the dominant message or preferred reading presented. Thomas found that viewers decoded this message in different ways due to their pre-existing attitudes and cultural constraints. Thomas found that while most participants in the study experienced negotiated readings, all types of decoding were possible. Despite the small size and limited nature of Thomas's study, it reinforces Buckingham's (1987) research, which found that messages were negotiated during viewing and that multiple ways of interpreting a television program could co-exist during a single viewing. Thomas notes, "What was particularly interesting about the viewing process was how many focus group members changed their perspective or role during the program" (Thomas 2010, para. 13). This is an important finding that warrants further investigation, because Hall's original work does not discuss the possibility of viewers shifting their interpretations throughout the viewing process but rather is limited to measuring outcome. Studying how this outcome is achieved and the steps that are taken to achieve it is a provocative question raised by this study.

From large studies in the 1970's like *Nationwide* to smaller ones like Susan Thomas's, the application of the Encoding/Decoding has been prevalent in communication literature. Researchers have tested the ideas, put them to use and critiqued each other's studies as well as the original process proposed by Hall. In the various articles and textbooks that discuss or utilize Hall's work, this approach to Encoding/Decoding has been referred to as a "process," a "model," and a "theory." Often, these terms are loosely used, but it is important to utilize the correct terminology while discussing this concept. So, I ask the question, is Hall's Encoding/Decoding a theory? To begin, we must first determine what a theory is and how a theory is evaluated.

Evaluating a Theory

A theory explains how and why things work; it is "a set of constructs that are linked together by relational statements that are internally consistent with each other" (Chaffee and Berger 1987: 101). A theory is also broad in scope and can be reduced to an overarching concept (Heath and Bryant 1992). This concept should accomplish the objectives of describing, explaining and predicting. This means a theory should conceptualize its constructs while explaining some aspects of the human experience and making predictions about future relationships while guiding speculation.

For example, Agenda Setting is a theory that describes the role of media in the social world. This theory explains the idea that the media's influence on audiences is that they tell people what to think about, not what to think. The overarching concept here explains the link between audience's exposure to media (television, radio, Internet) and how people perceive public issues. The constructs of television, audiences, exposure and effects in this example are internally consistent with one another. The theory acts as a "bridge" explaining the relationship between the independent variables like television exposure and dependent variables like influence because researchers can predict an impact of the independent variables on the dependent variable (Creswell 2005).

When speaking of impact, using the language of "influence" as opposed to "cause" is important. If causality is established as being necessary, then an extraordinarily high standard is being set since cause is often impossible to prove due to the influence of other factors. For example, if we observe a child who commits a violent act after watching TV, can it be proven that the cause of the child's actions was the television viewing? Can it even be stated that there was a cause? Possibly, the television program was one part of the meaning structures that made up the child's meaning structures including his/her frameworks of knowledge, relations of production and technical infrastructure that are also used to interpret meaning as laid out in the earlier schematic.

When evaluating a theory, it is important to first establish criteria that can be used for measurement. It is essential to note that we should not judge theories as being "good" or "bad." Instead, a theory is judged by its' usefulness. As such, there should be no divisions between theory and practice in the field. The theory should advance knowledge on a phenomenon and contribute to the field by proposing a new image of reality and helping us move forward. To assist in identifying these theories, Chaffee and Berger (1987) offer a list of attributes of a good theory. These criteria are used here because they are foundational concepts the authors identify as being similar to the list of attributes of a good theory that "most communication scientists – who are typically professors – outline for their beginning graduate students" (Chaffee and Berger 1987: 104). While Chaffee and Berger's list of criteria may not be new, they transcend time, are specific, and easily understood. Although they are presented as being useful only for communication scientists, we will see how their usefulness extends beyond the scientific realm. Chaffee and Berger's original attributes have been modified and expanded to create the following evaluative list that includes: explanatory power, predictive power, parsimony, testability, internal consistency, heuristic provocativeness, organizing power and boundary conditions.

Explanatory Power. Explanatory power is the most important aspect of any theory. If it does not explain anything, then it is not a theory. The greater the range of explanations provided and number of people affected, the more power a theory possesses. If the idea can be generalized and applied to a larger group, then it has greater explanatory power than if it is only applicable to one person.

Predictive Power. The ability to foretell future events determines the predictive power of an idea. The act of predicting events is sufficient. This criterion does not include the requirement of a prediction to be explained further.

Parsimony. Parsimony refers to how simply the theory can be explained. Simple theories are preferred over complex theories. Simpler ideas will correlate with more parsimonious theories and similarly, more complex ideas will be less parsimonious.

Testability. Chaffee and Berger (1987) utilize the concept of falsifiability or the capability of a theory to be proven false. Instead of provability, the criterion of testability is more useful. If a theory is not testable, we can then simply assess the empirical value of the constructs. This allows for more observational and descriptive methodological designs.

Internal Consistency. Internal consistency addresses the theories internal logic and seeks to understand if what is intended to be measured is being measured. This consistency is also known as validity. Beyond Chaffee and Berger's (1987) definition, the concept can be expanded to include seven questions of validity:

1. Content validity: Are the items representative of the field?
2. Criterion validity: can it be tied to an outside variable?
3. Face validity: does it make sense on the surface?
4. Construct validity: why does it operate?
5. Convergent validity: do the measures show agreement?
6. Discriminant validity: do the established scales agree with the hypothesis?
7. Nomological validity: do the basic entities fit together?

Heuristic Provocativeness. Heuristic Provocativeness seeks to understand if the theory is useful. A theory having high heuristic value will generate new research hypothesis and encourage thought beyond a concepts original boundaries.

Organizing Power. Organizing power explains the ability of the idea to make sense of existing knowledge. It describes attempts to understand how other theories may have been built around an idea and if it has guided speculation in the field.

Boundary Conditions. A theory should specify the extent of its generalizability and the phenomena it explains. It should be aware of the conditions that bound its existence and not attempt to explain conditions outside of its range.

Criteria analogous to these are most often applied to the evaluation of theories that fall within the four major categories of social scientific communications theory (Postpositivist, Hermeneutic, Critical, Normative). However, this process is equally useful when evaluating cultural theories. This is especially appropriate when the criteria are not used as a strict list of rules, but rather as a general guide; not all criteria are taken to be equally important in the evaluation process.

Cultural theories differ from social scientific theories in that they are heavily value-laden and admittedly less objective in their search for knowledge. Cultural theories, unlike social scientific theories, seek knowledge through dialectic, advancing knowledge through the formation of schools of thought in which there is consensus on validity and gaining power through the attraction of adherents defending against attacks from opponents (Baran and Davis 2012). But despite differences in epistemology and ontology, the primary goals of

explanation, description, and acquisition of new knowledge are compatible. Therefore, the complimentary objectives allow for the sharing of evaluation criteria.

Evaluating Encoding/Decoding as a Theory

References to Encoding/Decoding most often refer to the concepts as a model of communication. This is likely, in part, the result of two features in Hall's writing. First, he begins his article with a discussion of a linear model of communication. Using a model to lay the foundation for his discussion might lead some readers to assume his concepts should be classified in the same manner. Second, Hall provides a visual model of his concepts (as shown earlier in Fig 1.1) to help readers understand what he is describing. He uses the model as a tool, as a purposeful representation of reality. Yet the presence of a visual representation should not limit the classification of the information it explains.

A theory goes further than a model. It seeks not only to describe or represent, but to explain, and that is what Hall's ideas do. As Helen Davis states, "Hall's contribution to the research was to theorise*(sp)* what people actually do" (Davis 2004: 60). Instead of seeking solely to provide a new model, he proposed new hypothetical positions, new ways of explaining, understanding and organizing. For these efforts, Hall is recognized as a leading scholar and theorist of media, the "father" of the British Cultural Studies movement.

Coincidentally, one formal recognition of Hall's work was his being recognized with the Steven H. Chaffee Career Achievement Award in May 2014. That honor is bestowed annually to one scholar "for a sustained contribution to theoretical development or empirical research related to communication studies over an extended period. The selection committee favors research that is innovative, asks conceptually rich questions, and elaborates new theoretical possibilities and/or compelling directions for empirical investigation" (International Communication Association). It is this type of recognition that exemplifies the value of Hall's contributions and the necessary classification of work like Encoding/Decoding as more than a model.

To determine if Hall's Encoding/Decoding is indeed a theory, let us apply the modified Chaffee and Berger constructs of what a theory is.

What does it explain?

If a concept does not explain anything, then it is not a theory. Hall's Encoding/Decoding details the "determinant moments" that describe the production and reception of meanings and codes in televised communication (Hall 1980). It explains how television is a meaningful discourse and provides a greater understanding of both how media construct messages and how people make sense of what they see and hear. If the explanatory power of a theory is also measured by the range of phenomena and the number of people influenced from the intra-individual to the macroscopic societal level (Chaffee and Berger 1987: 107), Hall's concepts and their influence upon the entire field of cultural studies of media can be classified as having great explanatory power.

Is it easy to understand?

Encoding/Decoding has been called an "elaborated formula, which appears overly technical and abstract" (Davis 2004: 61). Despite the initial complexity, deeper analysis of Hall's

arguments and the application of those concepts to practical examples make the ideas more easily understandable. To help increase the degree of parsimony, Hall provides a visual model and explains each concept. So, while not simple, the ideas are explained in a reasonably straightforward manner.

Is it internally consistent?

Encoding/Decoding contains varying internal consistency. The idea has high face validity. To understand the concept that ideologies can be encoded in media content and that audiences decode these messages in varying ways based on varying factors makes sense. However, as noted in the *Nationwide* study, problems with validity may be perceived due to the reliance on qualitative and interpretive methods rather than quantitative methods. This is a disciplinary and methodological issue. While cultural studies heavily favors a qualitative method, interpretive approach, the inclusion of quantitative data in Encoding/Decoding studies might be perceived to be beneficial. This poor validity issue also places limits on how generalizable the findings may be beyond each circumstance. However, here lies the power of the concept. Each study may not be easily generalizable, but the concepts are easily testable.

Is it testable?

The concepts presented by Hall are easily testable, and the ubiquitous presence of studies that test Encoding/Decoding demonstrates the concepts testability. The studies listed in the Appendix are a representative sample of the many studies that have been performed since the late 1970's. There have been studies focusing on the processes of encoding, the process of decoding and both processes combined. These studies have been undertaken for a wide variety of programs, in different countries and have focused on different variables as being influential in the decoding process.

Is it heuristically provocative?

Encoding/Decoding has proven to be highly useful. It has high heuristic provocativeness and organizing power that guides speculation and research in the area of television audience studies. For example, building on Hall's ideas regarding encoding and deoding, communication researchers now incorporate the concept of feedback. Feedback is the activity in which viewers can participate after decoding a text as the meanings they make are communicated back to the encoder. One recent study on this process focused on a modern phenomenon called Social TV. Investigating the popular FOX show *Bones*, I found that audiences were transmitting their decoded meaning back to the show's writer's room, one site of encoding (Kropp 2014). In addition to applications in television studies research, the applicability of Hall's ideas has also extended into the study of other mediums such as magazines and books (Modleski 1984, Radway 1984). Additionally, the concepts can transcend mass media and applied to other forms of communication. For example, Keyan Tomaselli's work (2015) where he combines Hall's concepts with Peircean semiotics to analyze the use of a military dirty tricks campaign in South Africa.

Does it have organizing power?

Encoding/Decoding has proven to be a foundation for growth that has moved the area of audience reception studies forward. Challenging the prevailing beliefs in direct or limited media effects, Hall's concepts asked important questions, provided explanations and helped make sense of existing knowledge. As Hall states:

> The encoding/decoding model wasn't a grand model…I don't think it has the theoretical rigour, the internal logic and conceptual consistency for that. If it's of any purchase, now and later, it's a model because of what it suggests. It suggests an approach; it opens up new questions. It maps the terrain. But it's a model which has to be worked with and developed and changed (quoted in Davis 2004: 66).

As Hall explains, the organizing power of his ideas lies with their ability to guide speculation in the field. By challenging prevailing beliefs, proposing new ideas and providing options for researchers to investigate, Hall first organized the ideas that audiences are empowered and have the ability to interpret messages.

Does it have boundary conditions?

The arguments presented in Encoding/Decoding create clear boundaries. In literary or television studies, the ideas can be classified as part of audience reception theory. The concepts have been generalized to other media beyond television and researchers have started to revisit the ideas and apply them more broadly, but the work itself does not attempt to explain conditions outside of its range.

For these reasons, I would classify Encoding/Decoding as a theory. It was not a grand theory but would be best classified as a paradigm variation. When introduced, it offered a variation of emphasis in the area of active audience research, integrating and extending existing theoretical paradigms from semiotics, structuralism, Marxism and cognitive communication studies. Hall's perspective has proven to be useful. It can be applied, and it is practical, synthesizing theory and its practice in the field. Hall's conceptual work advanced knowledge about the phenomena of audiences and made a large contribution to the field by creating a new paradigm that focused upon active audiences. With the introduction of his work on encoding and decoding in the early 1970s, Stuart Hall opened the door for textual content studies and provided the foundation for cultural media studies.

Conclusion

Despite being a smaller theory, Encoding/Decoding represented a breakthrough paradigm variation in audience reception studies. Among other theories, it moved discourses of media effects from foundational stimulus-response models based on human behavior and then beyond an individualized cognitive thought-based model making effects or influence dependent on interpretations by the viewers to a larger culturally-based theory rooted in a Marxist understanding of the mechanisms by which cultural power circulates through ideology and the many ways that individuals may actively resist or negotiate that ideological power.

One important factor of these interpretations is that this theory allows for differences in interpretation of and acceptance of (or complicity with) the dominant ideological meanings of a work of media. Hall's concepts encouraged subsequent audience research into two areas: investigation, first, into the content that media produces and, second, into the audience themselves to gain better understanding of how messages are decoded, why people decode message in certain ways, why different people can interpret different and often contradictory meanings from the same messages and how these people form communities or social groups around others with shared interpretations. This leads to debates about the level of autonomy audiences have to interpret messages or if they are constrained by situational factors such as pre-existing beliefs and behaviors or environmental factors.

Encoding/Decoding, and the decades of research which has built upon it, certainly does not provide all of the answers regarding audience research. Many questions have been rigorously debated as well as those that remain to be examined. Does the cultural studies approach provide viewers with too much agency? Can we assume that all viewers are always decoding meanings from every text they are presented? During the process of decoding, do viewpoints remain consistent or can interpretations change? How long do the influences of decoded meanings continue to last? Does the process work in the same manner for people all of the time? What is the best way to measure decoding? Are producers of media content always aware of what meanings they are encoding? What influences? Furthermore, as Osgood and Schramm's circular model of communication suggests, how might the receiver influence the encoding of the sender to complete the circular communication loop?

The lack of answers to many of these questions should not be seen as a limitation but as a benefit of the theory. Raising questions indicates the richness of the theory's contribution to sparking further research in the field. Although critique is necessary and useful, we must still move forward and take advantage of the heuristic value of the theory.

The current trend of textual analysis in media studies is positive for increasing the number of tests performed on this theory and its heuristic value. However, focusing on one type of methodology does limit the application of the theory. These studies are relatively easy to accomplish because content is readily available, especially today with playback options provided by DVRs and online services such as Netflix and Hulu. There is a need for studies to continue to expand all of the concepts contained in the theory as well the new questions arising from new research. For example, Buckingham (1987) and Thomas (2010) found that viewers could actively change their views during consumption. This idea of alternating decodings leads to many new questions about the decoding process. Is there a specific time of decoding? What other factors affect decoding? Dorothy Hobson's (1982) study found that housewives were often distracted during viewing. Today, we can ask questions about how new technologies like the Internet might contribute to audience distraction and influence decoding processes. The Internet, as mentioned earlier, also provides a method of feedback for viewers to communicate with the parties responsible for the creation and encoding of messages. This raises new questions about how new media can introduce challenges to existing theories and offer opportunities to reevaluate, extend or even replace them.

As Hall stated, he did not see Encoding/Decoding as a grand theory, but according to this method of theory evaluation, it does earn the label of being a "theory." Applying a modified version of social scientific criteria in this instance was efficient, effective, and demonstrates how differences between schools of thought can be bridged.

Therefore, divergent assumptions should not prevent the use of advantageous tools that can help achieve our goals, which are on a more profound level, collective. We should remember that theories can advance our knowledge and contribute to our fields while serendipitously proposing new images of reality. We are all bound by our search for answers and our desires

to understand. So now is as good a time as any to stir the conversations about the ways we evaluate theories.

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APPENDIX

Select Studies Utilizing Encoding/Decoding, Listed Chronologically

This table identifies exemplars of studies using Hall's Encoding/Decoding concepts. Listed chronologically, the table identifies the use, focus, method and findings of each study. This list is not meant to be comprehensive or include all of the most well-known studies. Instead, it represents a compilation of well-known and often cited projects, smaller projects with unique findings, multiple methods (textual analysis, focus group discussions, observation, letters, questionnaires, interviews) and various areas of focus (gender, class, culture, age, race, religion) to demonstrate a breath of research.

Year	Author(s) and Title	Use	Focus	Method	Findings
1978	David Morley and Charlotte Brunsdon: *Everyday Television: 'Nationwide'*	Decoding	Class	Textual Analysis	Identified the "preferred reading" of Nationwide.
1980	David Morley: *The 'Nationwide' Audience*	Decoding	Class	Focus Group Discussions	People from different socioeconomic classes decode meanings in different ways. Yet, social class does not determine how messages are interpreted. People from the same class can have different interpretations. Meaning is the outcome of the viewer's interaction with the text. Viewers are not passive. Researchers need to study content, viewer backgrounds and experiences.
1982	Dorothy Hobson: *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera*	Decoding	Gender	Observation	Challenged 'preferred reading' concept. Emphasized the power of the audience to construct their own meanings from a text by combining the text, personal experiences and opinions.

1982	Tania Modlesky: *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*	Decoding	Gender	Textual Analysis	Identifies an oppositional 'female' aesthetic in viewing through identification with multiple characters, the use of camera techniques, and narrative structure.
1985	Ien Ang: *Watching "Dallas": Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*	Decoding	Gender	Letters	The pleasure women viewers experience watching Soap Operas supports arguments for active viewing. Dominant Ideologies are circumvented when viewers are shaping their meaning making activities on emotion.
1985	David Barker: *Television Production Techniques as Communication*	Encoding	n/a	Textual Analysis	The degree to which an encoded text communicates its preferred decoding is a function of production techniques utilized in the creation of narrative.
1986	Herta Herzog Massing: *Decoding "Dallas"*	Decoding	Culture	Interviews	Viewers in different countries decode meanings of popular culture differently.
1987	David Buckingham: *Public Secrets: East Enders and Its Audience*	Encoding	Gender/ Age	Focus Group Discussions	Active viewing by children during viewing can shift from deep involvement in the dramatic story to critical detachment. Differences in decoding were noted between various ages and genders.
1990	Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes: *Interacting with "Dallas": Cross Cultural Readings of American TV*	Decoding	Culture	Focus Group Discussions	Differences between ethnic groups in how television is watched and interpreted.
1991	Andrea Press: *Women Watching Television*	Decoding	Class	Interviews	"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" (Croteau and Hoynes 2014, 271-272).
1992	Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis: *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, And The Myth Of The American Dream*	Decoding	Race / Class	Focus Group Discussions	Viewers become involved with shows and see content as reality. Televised images distort reality and results in viewers of different races and class as having different reactions to the same show.
1992	JoEllen Shivley: *Cowboys and Indians: Perceptions of Western Films Among American Indians and Anglos*	Decoding	Culture	Focus Group Discussions	Different cultural groups can decode texts both consistently or oppositionally of dominant cultural myths.
1995	Marie Gillespie: *Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change*	Decoding	Culture	Ethnography	Television content can be used as a means of constructing new modes of identity. Viewers can decode the culture of characters and make comparisons with their own culture.

1997	Darnell Hunt: *Screening the Los Angeles "Riots": Race, Seeing and the Public Sphere*	Decoding	Race	Focus Group Discussions	Viewers constructed negotiated readings of television news. Racial differences played a significant role in decoding. Differences in social networks and sense of group solidarity influenced decoding, described as a social process.
2003	Evan Cooper: *Decoding Will and Grace: Mass Audience Reception of a Popular Network Situation Comedy*	Decoding	Gender	Questionnaires	Despite not being a group member, viewers from an "outsider group" who experience "culturally intimate humor' can decode texts in multiple ways.
2003	David W. Scott: *Mormon "Family Values" Versus Television: An Analysis of the Discourse of Mormon Couples Regarding Television and Popular Media culture*	Decoding	Religion	Interviews	Supports Encoding/Dcoding idea that marginalized groups may at times offer resistant or negotiated readings of texts.
2006	Giselinde Kuipers: *Television and Taste Hierarchy: The Case of Dutch Television Comedy*	Decoding	Culture	Surveys / Interviews	Enjoyment of comedy programs is based on the ability to decode that is predicated on knowledge, which varies by social group. Age and Education were found to be two variables correlating with preference for comedy type.
2008	Nancy Worthington: *Encoding and Decoding Rape News: How Progressive Reporting Inverts Textual Orientations*	Encoding/ Decoding	News	Interviews/Textual Analysis	Preferred readings do not always equate with dominant cultural discourses, they might maintain some dominant discourses while challenging others.
2010	Susan Thomas: *Makeover Television: Instruction and Re-Invention through the Mythology of Cinderella*	Decoding	Gender	Focus Group Discussions	Viewers can recognize hegemonic messages encoded in texts. If they are oppositional to the viewer's position, they can set aside the difference and continue to enjoy the program. Viewers can actively change their readings of texts during the viewing process.
2015	Keyan Tomaselli: *Encoding/decoding the transmission model and a court of law*	Encoding/ Decoding	Disinformation	Media Analysis	Combines Hall's Encoding/Decoding with C.S. Pierce's theory of the interpreter and interpretant. This is said to strengthen Hall's theory.