

# Notes on Text Production as a Field of Inquiry in Media Studies

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'Text production' denotes an area of media research which studies the production process and the resulting texts with a degree of theoretical, methodological and empirical integration. Text production research has a somewhat equivocal status within the field of mass communication and media research. On the one hand, the number of studies that focus on text production and the text are rather few, at least relative to the number of studies that combine a focus on the text with studies of reception processes. At the same time, studies of text production and the text are central to the idea of integrating, of unifying media research as a discipline. Meanwhile, the very notion of 'integration' is contested. Even within the research community it is common to regard mass media research as a loosely knit assembly of disciplines around certain common objects of study. Nonetheless, it is a fact that the development of media studies as a discipline is intimately bound up with the idea of an integrated perspective on the processes of mass communication. To the extent media studies can claim to have a common foundation, the notion of a continuum that links production, text and reception is quite central. This notion also represents much of the basis for media research as an interdisciplinary project, as well. Like reception studies, studies of text production are the setting for meetings between humanities approaches to the text and social science analyses of contexts and institutions. The integration project has been institutionalized – not least in the Nordic countries – through the creation of numerous research centres and departments that apply interdisciplinary approaches to the media and mass communication.

In this article I shall discuss studies of text production in the light of these larger research agendas: the desire to see mass communication as a continuous process, and the idea of integrating studies of the text in the humanities tradition with social science approaches to context. Most of the examples I use here will be borrowed from studies of television. If there is a narrowness of focus in terms of the media considered, it will be counterbalanced by the inclusion of television studies undertaken in a broad range of disciplines and research traditions. For, whereas studies of text production have been few to date, they are scattered within several sub-disciplines. We find them in journalism research, in production studies, and in research on media institutions.

In many of the ‘classical’ television studies that focus both on production and text, the relationship between the two foci is somewhat loose. Herbert Gans’ *Deciding What’s News* (1980) and the very broad analysis of the series, *Coronation Street* (Dyer et al. 1981) are prime examples. Both works include analyses of both the production and the text stages. But in neither case do the authors relate concrete production processes directly to the specific texts they resulted in. Instead, they conduct interviews and make observations that characterize the production process in more general terms, whereas the analysis of texts, which is qualitative, stands off to its own. As a consequence, the findings presented in *Deciding What’s News* and *Coronation Street* fall into two parts. The two parts work to produce an overall account, and several methodologies are made to co-exist without too much conflict within an overall research design. The empirical results are presented in a highly fruitful and thought-provoking manner. But when all is said and done, the specific relationships between production and text are no more than lightly touched on in terms of theory, nor are they followed up on the methodological and empirical levels.

Thus, even though the studies are interdisciplinary, they also reflect a tendency toward specialization, a division of labour in media studies which has worked against the ambition to integrate. The persistence of a fundamental divide between the humanities and the social sciences is still apparent, not least in our methodology and analytical praxis. The structure of media organizations, the relationships between media organizations, and the production processes within the structures have become three distinctly separate areas of social scientific inquiry (with journalism as a composite fourth area). On the humanities side we find a whole spectrum of approaches to the text: genre studies, narrative analysis, semiotics, text linguistics, to name but a few. Methodological development and empirical research design largely take place within these sub-disciplines. Clearly, studies of text production will tend to be a loose mixture of two or more of these traditions. But if it is true that methodological and empirical approaches that *integrate* production and text are few, one may wonder why this is so.

### **The Critique of the Concept of Intentionality**

One possible explanation may be that the theoretical implications of such an integration of production and text have not been discussed quite enough. Such a discussion will have to start from the critique of intentionality. The critique of individually oriented, elite-cultural notions of auteurism and intentionality features in a sizeable collection of works: Alvarado 1982, Bruun Andersen 1988, Murdock 1993, Newcomb/Alley 1983 inter alia. These authors argue convincingly that theories about the creation of television texts must be framed in the context of the cultural industries. That is to say, hierarchies, management and collective aspects of text production are of focal importance. But beyond the critique of intentionality, rather little theoretical work seems to have been done on the production phase in relation to broader processes of mass communication. That, at least, is the conclusion Manuel Alvarado came to in his review of the British literature – at a juncture, I might add, when most of the seminal British media research had been done. His judgment is harsh: “As far as theoretical work on film and television is concerned I would venture to suggest that *nothing* has been published on production” (Alvarado 1982:2, original emphasis). Among American studies of production one notes, if anything, a slight tendency toward the rehabilitation of notions of individual intention and creativity within the framework of television organizations (Newcomb/Hirsch 1994; Thompson/Burns 1990). As for empirical studies of produc-

tion, most of them focus only on the production process itself, sometimes with some textual perspectives tacked on for good measure. Finally, there is a pronounced tendency to concentrate the focus on individual productions and the creative core of the production teams. Neither programme policy discussions undertaken at the top levels of management nor programme scheduling decisions, also taken at the top, have received very much attention (notable exceptions being Caldwell 1995 and Gitlin 1983).

What has hindered those who study production from developing concepts, models and concrete analyses of the interplay between production and text? One possible explanation is that the dominant critique of intentionality within literary criticism – which is widely accepted within media research, as well – does not encourage efforts toward integration. Since Wimsatt and Beardsley's (1989) critique of historical-biographical approaches to literary criticism, a dominant view has been that the meaning of a text neither can nor should be traced back to any intention on the part of the sender. Wimsatt and Beardsley look upon such derivation as untenable psychologizing projection, an "intentional fallacy". The anti-auteur position has predominated within both neocritical and structuralist textual analysis, and within post-structuralist analysis thereafter, as well. If anything, it has become more pronounced, as in the later work of Roland Barthes, who writes provocatively of "the death of the author" (Barthes 1977; see also Foucault 1977). Post-structuralism has been criticized by media researchers for neglecting the issue of socially situated agency (Gripsrud 1995, Tulloch 1990, *inter alia*). Graham Murdock (1993) comments that Barthes' contention regarding the death of the author should be seen as part of an historically specific polemic, aimed at certain traditional points of view within literary criticism. In Murdock's view, it is entirely possible to maintain the concept of a relationship between text and production, provided you keep individualistic and romantic ideas about intention at an arm's length. Such a broader conception is both possible and desirable, he argues. But Murdock does not tell us how to get from what is theoretically possible and desirable to what is theoretically founded. Nor does he indicate how to get from the theoretically founded to what is methodically and analytically practicable.

### **The Problem of Relative Autonomy**

Stuart Hall's article, "Encoding/Decoding" (1992) is a seminal attempt to construct a theoretical and conceptual framework for studies of the relationship between text and context, both in television and in communication processes more generally. It has given rise to decidedly more discussion of the relation between text and reception than between text and production. Yet Hall's article, with its concept of 'encoding', is very much concerned with text production. With the concepts of encoding and decoding Hall attempts to take account of both transmission (from sender to receiver) and how meaning enters into the process. Borrowing a phrase from Marx, Hall characterizes the process as "a passage of forms" (Hall 1992:128). Hall formulated his theory in opposition to linear conceptions of the communication process and their tendency to ignore the discourse aspects of communication. In the article, Hall sets out to formulate a theory that incorporates semiological insights, conceiving of texts as sign structures. Hall's encoding and decoding are characterized both by "determination" and "relative autonomy", as he puts it. An element of autonomy arises in the transition between production and text, at the point where the text attains the status of "meaningful discourse".

The element of 'relative autonomy' introduces a measure of fundamental uncertainty into the relationships between the three components of mass communication. But at the

same time, Hall's encoding/decoding model forms a continuum; production, distribution and reception are conceived of as a closed system. This is because Hall's ulterior aim is to account for the self-sustaining logic of capitalist market economics. One can therefore look upon his now classic triad of possible decodings, "dominant", "negotiated" and "oppositional", as a way to contain the element of relative autonomy. The triad both allows for uncertainty in the relationship between text and interpretation and seeks to limit it so as to secure the predominance of determination. Hall does not go on to discuss how one might go about conceptualizing the relationships between production and text. On the whole, this side of the model is less developed. Hall tends to underemphasize the discursiveness of the sender side and overemphasize it on the text side, where he speaks of "programme[s] as meaningful discourse" and not of their material aspects. It is problematic that Hall apparently sees the establishment of "meaning structures" as occurring in the transition from production to text, i.e., after the production process itself. Although Hall notes that production, too, has a discursive aspect (*Ibid.*:129), the observation is not reflected in the encoding/decoding model. Thus, Hall comes close to conceiving of the production-text linkage as a passage from a material level of production to a level of immanent meaning in the text. Consequently, even though the model was formulated in explicit opposition to linear communication models, it nonetheless tends toward a conception of text production that is linear in the sense that *first* comes production, *then* the text.

In other words, the discourses on the sender side, and the ways in which they contribute to the text production process, are underrepresented in Hall's model. There is room for further development of the discussion here, and various studies, particularly in later years, have sought to explore whether and in what ways text production presumes some measure of text interpretation on the sender side (Cottle 1995; Dornfeld 1998; Ekström 1998; Helland 1992; Jacobs 1996; Schudson 1995 *inter alia*). Already at the start of the text production process those involved in a given production need to have a measure of common understanding of the goal, of the kinds of texts they are setting about to produce. Thus, text production involves a recursive connection; the production of texts presumes a set of previous text interpretations that are negotiated and subjected to compromises in a social and professional context. As Allan Bell (1991:99) has pointed out, the actors are "both audience and producer". The alternation between production and interpretation is, quite simply, prerequisite to text production. Only through the production process can a text emerge, and only through experience of texts can the production process take place.

Viewed in this way, the reception and production processes seem much more akin than they do in, for example, Hall's model. As Ronald N Jacobs (1996) points out, the notion of an interaction between the productive and interpretive elements is just as important for the study of text production as it is in studies of text reception. Both text production and text reception involve subjects who develop a set of expectations regarding future text interpretations – expectations which in turn are based on previous interpretations. It is a question of basic hermeneutic mechanisms. Every instance of textual interpretation must be based in some way or another on pre-understandings of the text in question, and of the categories of texts to which it belongs. Thus, the text interpretation itself serves both to consolidate and to revise the subject's fore-judgements. Therefore, it is neither necessary nor accurate to posit that the text 'precedes' the interpretation. It is obviously not the case in the production of texts, nor it is true of receptions of texts inasmuch as text interpretation requires fore-judgements. In production, as in reception, the element of productivity is dependent on an element of interpretation. In his thinking

about hermeneutic processes Hans-Georg Gadamer reflects that “interpretation is probably, in a certain sense, re-creation” (as cited in Wilson 1995:46). For example: Before a newscast can be produced the journalists and other programme staff have to have developed a more or less shared understanding of the news genre in general, and of the particular aspects of the text which they are to work on. Professional training and work experience guide the actors in acquiring suitable interpretive repertoires.

Conceiving of text production and text interpretation as mutually constitutive elements means that one emphasizes not only the constructive nature of interpretation, but its continuity, as well. The production of news programmes is, for example, planned as a continuous, non-finite activity that transcends the individual newscast. Thus, it has no definite beginning and end, but consists of continuous and organized alternations between confirmation and revision, between repetition and novelty. This continuous interaction between texts and interpretations is described by Charles Sanders Peirce as an “unlimited semiosis”. Peirce describes the process as a “series of successive interpretants” that in principle is endless (as cited in Nöth 1995:43).

Production in the framework of cultural industries may be seen as a kind of disciplining of this social semiosis in order to ensure a regular and continuous stream of texts. In such industrial production conflicts and power struggles inevitably arise when individual interpretations are to be bridled and coordinated in order to meet deadlines, to fit budget frames, and to serve policy and strategy goals. This is where the semiosis of production parts ways with the semiosis of reception. Whereas mass media reception involves the construction of meaning out of texts over which the interpreter has little or no influence, the interpreters on the sender side have the power to turn their interpretations, first into a coordinated set of text expectations, and from there into new texts. Another crucial difference, of course, lies in the organizational framing of power and roles in text production.

### **Meaning in Context**

Recent years’ research on text production has increasingly included studies which link production and the text by focusing on the ways in which production involves interpretation, negotiations and compromises regarding the text. Thus, insights regarding the production of symbolic meaning and textual structures are integrated with insights about decisions and priorities made by individuals in social and institutional contexts. Discussions about the discipline in recent years have called for more of this kind of research. One such discussion concerned the relationship between Political Economy and so-called Cultural Studies. Among the points of debate is the tendency toward a division of labour whereby researchers in the former tradition study the economic, political and institutional structures that shape decision-making processes in mass communications, whereas researchers in the cultural studies tradition take care of the structures of potential meaning in the text and their interpretations. As a consequence of this division of labour, the political economists have concentrated on the production side of mass communication and the determinant factors that are at play there. Researchers in cultural studies, for their part, have explored the relationship between text and interpreter in a manner that seems to imply a greater element of negotiation and resistance toward determining elements (for a review and reflection on this aspect, see Ferguson/Golding 1997). Several researchers, finding this division of labour unfortunate, have urged that discussions of determinant factors in production include cultural and interpretive processes (Born 1993; Curran 1996; Murdock 1997).

Because these initiatives have come in the wake of a strong focus on reception in the 1980s and early 1990s, the call for an integrated approach has sometimes been raised in polemic opposition to reception studies' alleged "revisionism" and "populism". More recently, however, text production researchers have emphasized the similarities between studies of text production and studies of reception and have not hesitated to draw on reception studies (Dornfeld 1998; Jacobs 1996). They also stress that such inquiry requires some measure of alignment of approaches to text and approaches to (institutional) context. One who has stressed the value of such alignment is Jan Ekecrantz. Taking his point of departure in modern sociological theory, Ekecrantz (1998a, 1998b) calls for media research that explores the forms of interaction between structures and actors, material and symbolic levels, and between voluntarism and determinism. A 'middle way' between these poles, Ekecrantz suggests, may best be found through research approaches that integrate textual and contextual aspects – and which also bridge the gaps between established humanities and social science approaches. Ekecrantz emphasizes that this integration should not be left a theoretical postulate, while text and context remain separate in actual investigations. He goes on to point out certain concepts in recent research that suggest a movement toward the integration of text and context: 'meso-level', 'discourse', 'genre' and 'institution'. He joins in the call for studies that show how text and context interact in concrete instances: at specific times and places, and in specific institutional and social settings (cf. Corner 1997; Fairclough 1995; Schudson 1991).

In terms of theory, this position is not particularly controversial within contemporary media research. As noted earlier, the problems become acute when principles are to be operationalized in concrete inquiry inasmuch as the research on text production has certain epistemological problems that will recur in methodological and empirical phases. The recent Nordic scientific work Ekecrantz (1998b) cites as examples of research that integrates textual and contextual perspectives is work in which the empirical and methodological emphasis rests on texts. "Context" in these studies is primarily understood as the discourses, broader institutional structures and/or genres to which the texts belong. But, 'context' can also be taken to refer to the concrete production and reception processes of which the texts form a part. How, then, can we respond to the methodological and empirical challenges of this latter kind of research?

### **Three Strategies for Research on Text Production**

Text production researchers' methodological and empirical priorities will largely depend on the time-frame they choose for their study. As the industrial production of culture (and particularly television) is a serial, continuous activity, the processes to be studied stretch over long periods of time. The development of genres, formats, organizational structures and professional cultures takes months and years. If one wishes to study such complex and gradual processes, a likely focus of study will be the interaction of production and text in the media institution over time. In the case of decidedly extended processes like television news production one may, for example, choose to follow the planning and implementation of a given newscast with particular attention to the negotiations and compromises that take place in the process regarding the text. Then, one might consider an initiative to change the format of the programme and study the process of change in relation to the staff members' perceptions of past productions. These changed perceptions will feed into the negotiations of the production process and result in a new collective compromise on how future texts should look and sound. The

task of the researcher is to analyze how these negotiations link changes in textual interpretation to changes in professional culture, in programme policy, in the structure of the organization and in its resource allocations. The new collective compromise, then, is implemented as a new text.

Such an approach allows the researcher to examine the relationship between production and text over extended periods, which makes it possible to see how things like genres and professional cultures are established, maintained and/or changed. One might call this an *exchange strategy*. (Examples of works that follow such a strategy, wholly or in part, are Anderson 1990; Djerf Pierre 1996; Tulloch/Alvarado 1983; Ytreberg 1999). The advantage of the exchange strategy is that it fits new insights about text production into a research design that makes it possible to relate negotiations and conflicts in the production process to characteristics of the text in such a way that the relationships between priorities and their outcomes are clearly apparent. Thus, the exchange strategy brings empirical study of long-term processes of change in cultural industries within reach. One can, for example, proceed from the processual character of genre as a theoretical postulate (Neale 1980) to a study of the process empirically.

The principal drawback with the exchange strategy is that the empirical task has a tendency to grow to unwieldy proportions. It is indeed a demanding task to capture the interplay between the various levels and stages of text production over an extended period of time. In addition, it will often prove necessary to say something about the interplay between the media institution and society and between concrete texts and the broader currents of genre and format development. The exchange strategy brings the promise of research with the kind of attention to detail and nuance that picks up both the continuities and conflicts of text production. But it is a bit risky to take on the type of “thick description” that anthropological methods often prescribe – due to one’s limited capacity, but also to the constraints on one’s choice of methods. The exchange strategy tends to require analysis of a number of production processes that have occurred in the past. In that case observation is of limited use, as it can only be used to find out about processes of today that more or less resemble the processes one is interested in. The researcher has to reconstruct the concrete chain of events in text production through interviews and documentary analysis. Those who choose the exchange strategy will have to strike a balance between the need to be concrete about the interplay of production and text and the need to formulate an overall analysis of many processes over a long period of time. That means that the analysis will have to be built up around important turning points in the text production process – e.g., a reorganization that alters the position of the profession or a change of policy that requires a major adjustment of textual interpretations. Those who follow the exchange strategy must therefore take care not to overrepresent change and underrepresent repetition/stability.

Traditionally, the alternative to the exchange strategy has been the *separation strategy*. As mentioned earlier, it means that production and text are treated separately in the use of methodology and in the analysis, whereas the findings of the separate parts are reported together. The problem here is the lack of any real analysis of the interplay between production and text. A third strategy might be called the *generative strategy*. Here, the researcher follows a single text, programme or series from the first stages of concept development, through the production process, to the final result, the text. The main drawback here is the linearity that is more or less built into the approach. The generative strategy would appear to be better suited to works of elite culture than to the cultural industries, yet there are good reasons why this approach is still used. First of all, it is empirically manageable; secondly, it lends itself to observational methods. It

produces a richer, more detailed material than documentary analysis or interviews do, and it can also be combined with these methods. Also, this kind of empirical analysis is quite compatible with a focus on the interpretations, negotiations and compromises regarding the text. (This aspect is particularly in focus in Dornfeld 1998; Ekström 1998; Helland 1995; Saferstein 1992, *inter alia*.)

### **Between a Set of Common Research Objects and a Unified Science**

The underlying thesis in this article is that a greater degree of integration is desirable in studies of text production. But what level of integration is it meaningful to strive for? Quite a lot suggests that it is futile to operate with ideals of a unified science, a kind of ‘core’ that other disciplines might appear to have and that media research might strive to achieve. As pointed out in connection with Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model, the ‘relative autonomy’ between the instances of communication constitutes a theoretical hindrance which is not likely to disappear.

In many respects, the theoretical development has followed a contrary course. The tradition that hails back to Shannon & Weaver’s information theory-based model has a strong linear bent, and conceives of communication as direct transmission of information from a sender via the message to a receiver. More recent models qualify the proposition of linear and direct transmission in mass communication. In his encoding/decoding model Hall does this by introducing a semiotic dimension of meaning. The result is that a fundamental *uncertainty* surrounds the respective points at which meaning is encoded and decoded, suspended as they are between ‘determination’ and ‘relative autonomy’. If one accepts this uncertainty as a permanent and constant element in mass communication, one necessarily imposes a limit on the integration project. The discussion here, for example, can be no more than an attempt to translate between production and text. It cannot reconcile the two as the attainment of a unified discipline presupposes. Perhaps this means that media researchers will always have to alternate or ‘commute’ between the instances of the mass communication process. But it does not mean that media studies’ attempts to institutionalize interdisciplinarity has been pointless. The ‘state of the art’ within text production studies suggests that there is room for fruitful development in theory, methodology and research design across established boundaries – even if the dream of a unified science may best be left behind.

Interdisciplinary research is sometimes criticized for its shallowness. There is also the worry that media researchers will lose contact with developments in the ‘parent disciplines’. In his lecture at the 13th Conference of Nordic Mass Communication researchers in 1997 Jostein Gripsrud argued – under the motto, “*Ad fontes!*” – that media researchers should turn more to what the research traditions in, for example, History, Aesthetics and Philosophy have to offer (Gripsrud 1998). There is no denying that interdisciplinary approaches do have drawbacks or that reading Kant can yield insights. But the question is whether a return “to the sources” will advance interdisciplinarity or, rather, put it on ice. The institutionalization of interdisciplinary inquiry in media research has not occurred simply because the ‘hype’ surrounding the objects of research in our field. The interdisciplinary approach is part of a scientific agenda for the investigation of the links between production, text and reception. Acquiescing to the idea that media research should be no more than a collection of researchers having different academic training around a common object of inquiry means a retreat from that agenda. It also means turning one’s back on the consequences of institutionalization, which have long been in effect. Among these consequences are a generation of ‘orphans’, of re-

searchers who have no ‘parent discipline’; for them, the agenda of interdisciplinary exploration is perhaps the closest to a scientific platform they are likely to get.

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