

MEDIA STUDIES—THEORIES AND THEORISTS

Theory	Theorist	Summary	Nutshell	
Semiotics	Roland Barthes	The study of signs and meaning	Texts communicate their ideas through signification . Signs function at a literal level (signifier, denotation) as well as a figurative level (signified, connotation). Exposure to certain symbolic constructions can become self-evident, as the sign becomes myth through naturalisation .	Media Language
Narratology	Tzvetan Todorov	The study of narrative	All narratives share a basic structure, moving from one equilibrium to another. These two states of equilibrium are separated by disruption or imbalance. The way that narratives resolve can have ideological significance .	
Genre Theory	Steve Neale	The classification of media products	Genres are dominated by repetition of codes and conventions but must also incorporate difference, variation and change . Genres change as they borrow from and overlap with each other (hybridity and subgenres). Genres exist within specific economic, institutional and industrial contexts .	
Structuralism	Claude Lévi-Strauss	The underlying structures through which meanings are made	Texts can be understood through an analysis of their underlying structure . Meaning is often produced through oppositional pairs (e.g. good v. evil). The resolution of these binary opposites can have ideological significance .	
Postmodernism	Jean Beaudrillard	The making of meanings in a post-structuralist world.	The boundaries between the “real” and “mediated” worlds have collapsed. Signs are a process of signification with no signifier underlying them; they no longer refer to anything “real” or “literal”. Mediated images now seem more “real” than the reality they supposedly represent (hyperreality).	
Theories of Representation	Stuart Hall	How representations are constructed.	Representation is the production of meaning through language (a system of signs). Stereotyping reduces people and things to a few simple characteristics or traits . Stereotyping tends to occur where there is disparity of power , with subordinated/excluded groups being different or “ other ”.	Representation
Theories of Identity	David Gauntlett	Media help us to construct our identities.	Media provides us with ‘tools’ and resources that we use to shape our identities . In the past, these media toolboxes were simple; as the mediated world has become more complicated, we now have a wide range of media models — a pick-and-mix of different ideas that we can choose from.	
Feminist Theory	Liesbet van Zoonen	Gender is constructed through discourse.	Gender , as a product of discourse , changes depending on cultural and historical context . The objectification of women’s bodies is core to Western patriarchal culture . The codes used in mainstream media to construct the male body are different from the mediated/objectified female body.	
	bell hooks	Smash the patriarchy.	Feminism is a political commitment rather than a lifestyle choice. The intersection of race and class (as well as sex) determine the extent to which individuals are exploited or oppressed.	
Theories of Gender Performativity	Judith Butler	Identity is a performance.	Identity is performatively constructed by the very “acts” or “expressions” that are thought to be its results. There is no inherent gender identity behind the expressions of gender. Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition or ritual.	
Theories around ethnicity and Post-colonial Theory	Paul Gilroy	Exploring the legacy of colonialism and imperialism.	Colonial discourses continue to inform contemporary attitudes to race and ethnicity . “ Civilisationism ” constructs racial hierarchies and sets up binary oppositions based on notions of “ other ”ness.	

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Power and Media Industries Theory	James Curran and Jean Seaton	Media is driven by the logic of power and profit.	Media is controlled by a small number of companies primarily concerned with gaining profit and power . Media concentration typically inhibits or limits variety, creativity and quality . Socially diverse patterns of ownership help to create conditions for more varied and adventurous media products.	
Regulation Theory	Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt	Exploration of media policy.	There is an underlying struggle between the need to further the interests of citizens (protection from harmful material) and the interests of consumers (choice, value, competition). The rise of media conglomerations and the emerging production, distribution and marketing of digital media have placed traditional approaches to media regulation at risk.	
Cultural Industries Theory	David Hesmondhalgh	Exploration of media industries.	Media companies try to minimise risk and maximise audiences through vertical and horizontal integration and through the form of their media/cultural products (through genre , serial format and by including stars). The largest companies and conglomerates now operate across a number of media industries. The Internet, and its radical potential, has been partially contained by its incorporation into large, profit-oriented cultural companies .	
Media Effects Theory	Albert Bandura	The effects that media have on audiences.	Media is capable of implanting ideas directly into the minds of its audiences. Audiences respond to the modelling in media and, thereby, acquire new attitudes, styles of conduct and emotional responses. Media representation of transgressive or antisocial behaviour can lead audience members to imitate those forms of behaviour.	Audiences
Cultivation Theory	George Gerbner	The effects that media have on audiences	Repeated exposure to patterns of representation over long periods of time can shape and influence the way the audience perceives the world around them (i.e. by cultivating particular points of view and opinions). Cultivation reinforces mainstream, or dominant, values and ideologies .	
Reception Theory	Stuart Hall	Exploring encoding and decoding meaning.	Communication is a process involving encoding by producers and decoding by the audience. There are three hypothetical positions from which meanings can be decoded: 1. the dominant-hegemonic position: the encoder’s intended meaning is fully understood and accepted ; 2. the negotiated position: the legitimacy of the encoder’s message is acknowledge, but the message is adapted to better fit the decoder’s individual experiences or context ; 3. the oppositional position: the encoder’s message is understood , but the decoder disagrees with it, reading it in a contrary or oppositional way.	
Fandom	Henry Jenkins	Exploring fan’s participation in culture.	Fans are active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings . Fans also appropriate texts and read them in ways that are not fully authorised by the media producers (“ textual poaching ”) Fans construct their social and cultural identities by borrowing and inflecting mass culture images and participate in a culture that offers a vital social dimension .	
‘End of Audience’ Theory	Clay Shirky	Exploring the relationship between digital media production and consumption.	The internet and digital technologies have a profound effect on the relations between media and individuals. In the age of the internet, audience members or no longer passive consumers of mass media content: consumers now have the ability to “speak back to” media in various ways. Media consumers engage in the creating and sharing of content with one another .	