

# Understanding Media Communications: The Encoding / Decoding Approach

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Centre de collaboration nationale  
sur les politiques publiques et la santé  
National Collaborating Centre  
for Healthy Public Policy

*Institut national  
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Québec 

# Overview of Session

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- Introduction
- Classical approaches to media communications
- The encoding / decoding approach
- Practical exercises
- Conclusion



# Introduction

- Objectives
  - Illustrate how media products can be interpreted in different ways
  - Provide understanding of different « moments » of communication
  - Provide understanding of how media messages and their interpretation(s) are « socially located »



# Introduction

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- Understanding media texts
  - What is the meaning of this message?





IT JUST  
TASTES  
BETTER



**IT'LL BLOW  
YOUR MIND AWAY**



**BK SUPER SEVEN INCHER**



**\$6.25**  
MEAL

Fill your desire for something long, juicy and flame-grilled with the **NEW BK SUPER SEVEN INCHER**. Yearn for more after you taste the mind-blowing burger that comes with a single beef patty, topped with American cheese, crispy onions and the A.1.<sup>®</sup> Thick & Hearty Steak Sauce.





# Introduction

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- Understanding media texts
  - What is the meaning of this message?

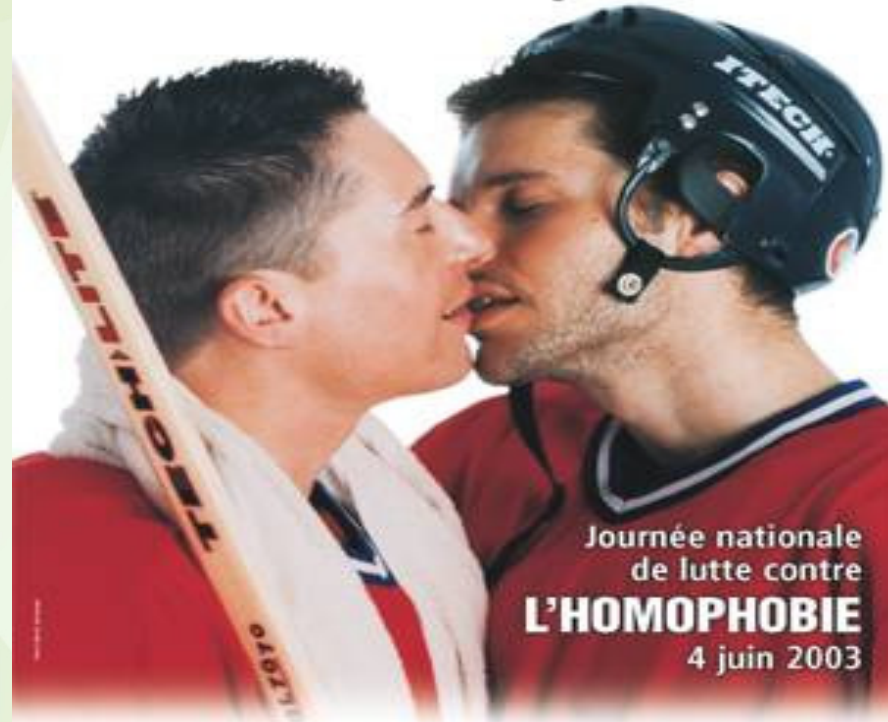




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# CHOQUANT? Pour les homophobes!



Journée nationale  
de lutte contre  
**L'HOMOPHOBIE**  
4 juin 2003



Neuf ans de  
la lutte aux  
préjugés

De la tolérance à l'acceptation  
[www.homophobie.org](http://www.homophobie.org)

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# Classical approaches to media communication

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- Communication as a linear process



# Classical approaches to media communication

- Communication as a linear process
- « Hypodermic needle theory »



# Classical approaches to media communication

- Communication as a linear process

« Magic bullet theory »



# Classical approaches to media communication

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- Communication as a (relatively) linear process
  - The media « effects » approach
  - The « uses and gratifications » approach



# The encoding / decoding approach

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- Elements of context
  - 1960s /70s Britain / British academia
  - Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (The « Birmingham School »)
  - Culture, politics, and communication
  - Stuart Hall
    - Encoding /decoding





# The encoding / decoding approach

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- Turning point in media communication theory
- Conclusive break with
  - Dominant (American) models
  - Aesthetics
  - Idea of audiences as passive consumers



# The encoding / decoding approach

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- Every « moment » in the process of communication has its own determinants
  - Encoding (the original composition of the message)
  - Decoding (the point at which the message is « read » and understood)



# The encoding / decoding approach

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- Production and consumption are determined by a range of influences:
  - Discourses of the medium
  - Discursive contexts of composition and consumption
  - Technologies used

*There is nothing natural about communication*



# The encoding / decoding approach

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*There is nothing natural about communication*

- Messages have to be constructed before they can be sent
- Construction and reception are active, social events



# The encoding / decoding approach

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- The audience is not a single undifferentiated mass
  - There is bound to be a lack of fit between some aspects of production and reception of messages





# The encoding / decoding approach

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- Potential for misunderstanding is limited by communication systems
  - Many « codes » used in media messages appear to be natural because they have become completely normalized



# The encoding / decoding approach

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« *French aircrash disaster inquiry shock* »



# The encoding / decoding approach

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- Messages are polysemic, but not totally pluralistic
  - Not predetermined, but composed within a system dominated by accepted codes
  - Dominant meanings are « preferred »



# The encoding / decoding approach

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- « Encoding » media messages attempts to set up some of the limits of interpretation
  - Works to enforce and command the « dominant » understanding of the message



# The encoding / decoding approach

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- Three « hypothetical » positions from which media texts can be understood
  1. Dominant / « preferred » position
  2. Negotiated position
  3. Oppositional position







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