

**INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES: BEYOND “MASS” COMMUNICATION**  
**By BRYAN MURLEY**

**Originally written as a final paper for J702: Media Theory in the University of South Carolina School of Journalism and Mass Communication. All rights reserved. Proper citation requested.**

**INTRODUCTION**

The past 20 years has seen what has been called the “ethnographic turn” in audience research. From the view of the mass media audience as a composite construction, theorists have begun to study “audiences” as smaller units using qualitative measures. Informed by critical cultural theories and postmodern literary theory, new researchers have reshaped the landscape of media studies. These research avenues have met with praise and criticism, but represent a deeper understanding of the relationship between media and the people who interact with them. This paper examines one such new theoretical development: interpretive communities. After an examination of the broader theoretical developments within this ethnographic turn, I will highlight some of the key concepts in the interpretive community theory, then look at the strengths and weaknesses of this theoretical standpoint before finally positing a way forward for researchers in this postmodern paradigm.

**AUDIENCE RESEARCH: AN OVERVIEW**

To understand the radical departure of interpretive communities and the entire spectrum of “reader response” theories, one must first understand the history of audience research. Such research and theorizing has followed a path from answering the question “who is reading/watching,” to “why are they watching/reading?” to finally focus on

“what does the message mean to the audience member?” McQuail identified these three strands of audience research as the structuralist, behaviorist and cultural traditions.

(McQuail, 2000)

The most “modern” form of audience research focused on the question of “who?” This strand of “structuralist” research centered on determining numbers so that media outlets (broadcast and print) could figure out advertising rates based on the number of potential viewers/readers. The obvious need for such numbers led to “an immense industry interconnected with that of advertising and marketing research.” (McQuail, p. 366).

A second stream of research began to surface later that asked two more important questions: “What happens to them when they watch?” And “Why are they watching?” The former question is the focus of media effects research, exemplified by the studies of television violence (e.g. Bandura’s *Social Learning Theory*) (Griffin, 2003). Contrasting with the causal link between media use and behavior provided in effects theory, but still in the same strand, is media use theory (McQuail, p. 366) typified by uses and gratification theory. While this strand can use quantitative methodology, it also lends itself to qualitative research. Either way, the primary emphasis shifted from counting heads to considering reasons behind the presence of those heads. Still, the emphasis lay in the behavior of audience members and the reasons for that behavior.

Finally, McQuail notes that a third form of audience research arose that focused on the meaning of media messages. Within this third wave, there are further delineations of study. Critical cultural theory asked the question, “what does this text say about power relations?” And the theory of interpretive communities approached the manufacture of

meaning from a broader perspective: that of the community. Interpretive communities asked “What does the community think?”<sup>1</sup>

## INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES

Literary theorist Stanley Fish first championed the cause of interpretive communities in his collection of essays, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. (1980) Under traditional “formalist” literary theory, the meaning of a particular work of literature was bound up within the artifact itself. The job of the reader was to ferret out that meaning and apply it. Fish struck a direct blow against this construction. His language could not have been plainer: the meaning of a text does not lie in the artifact, but within the interpretation.

The relationship between interpretation and text is thus reversed: interpretive strategies are not put into execution after reading: they are the shape of reading, and because they are the shape of reading, they give texts their shape, making them rather than, as is usually assumed, arising from them. (Fish, 1980)

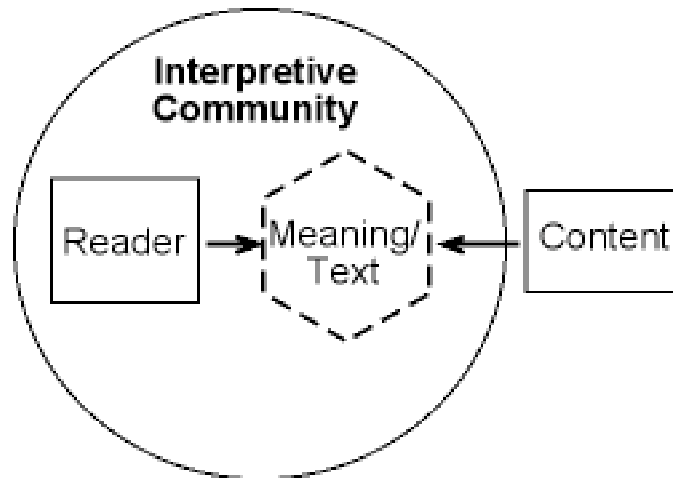
This would seem to make the individual the center of all meaning, but Fish was quick to add to his role reversal with the crucial role played by the community of individuals.

Fish proposes that “the strategies in question are not his in the sense that would make him an independent agent. Rather, they proceed not from him but from the interpretive community of which he is a member; they are, in effect, community property, and insofar as they at once enable and limit the operations of his consciousness, he is too. (Fish, 1980)

The interpretive process is depicted in the diagram below.

---

<sup>1</sup> While McQuail places critical theory within the third category, Lindlof later places critical theory in a category with effects research based on the paradigm of “presented meaning” vs. “constructed meaning.” See discussion of meaning, p. 6 .



**Diagram 1: The interpretation process in Interpretive Communities**

The reader is located within the community, and the meaning, or “text,” of the reader/content interaction is created within the community as well. The community provides both a boundary and a roadmap for interpretation. The meaning/text polygon is represented with a dotted line to show that the interpretation is not a thing unto itself (idiosyncratic), but a product and part of the community.

The first major work to flow out of the theory proposed by Fish was a study of romance novel readers entitled *Reading the Romance* (Radway, 1984). The study developed the interpretive community theory through the lens of feminist theory, but remains a work that is often cited in literature reviews on the topic. For an academic book, it was highly successful, and was something of a phenomenon in Britain, where cultural studies was taking off under the aegis of theorists like Stuart Hall, David Morley and Shaun Moores.

Thomas Lindlof, a professor at the University of Kentucky, can be credited with suggesting the use of interpretive communities to study media messages (Lindlof, 1988). Lindlof posited interpretive communities as a way to study media audiences that went beyond both structural and behavioral paradigms.

In the place of conceiving and operationalizing the media audience as an aggregate phenomenon, there springs a concern with how media are accommodated within the working assumptions of social groups for the purpose of constituting and controlling the meanings of their activities. (Lindlof, 1988).

For Lindlof, the interpretive community concept is “hermeneutic.” Its modes of understandings and rules of discourse are hidden from “external benchmarks of interpretation or usage.” (Lindlof, 1988, p. 82)

This leads to Lindlof’s simplified definition of the interpretive community, put forward in an article in the *Journal of Media and Religion*: “Simply put, an interpretive community is a collectivity of people who share strategies for interpreting, using, and engaging in communication about a media text or technology.” (Lindlof, 2002)

Here, then, is where the media theory of interpretive communities diverges somewhat from Fish’s earlier conception. Where Fish focused on the meaning of literary texts, Lindlof expands the theory to *any* mediated content, and also the technologies used to deliver that content. The use of the term “content” is deliberate, for the term *text* in the context of interpretive community theory differs from a traditional understanding of the word. This leads us to consider the various concepts implied by the interpretive community construct.

## CONCEPTS

As mentioned above, a *text* in this theoretical conceptualization is not a *text* as understood in everyday language. It is the first term that needs explanation, then, upon examining the foundational concepts of the theory. According to Fish, the “text” is the *meaning* derived from an interaction between a reader and the content (i.e., the physical piece of literature, TV show, musical recording, newspaper article, etc.). This meaning is

not directly related to the reader/content interaction. Indeed, the “meaning” of a text may be produced long after the reader has interacted with the actual artifact. (Fish, 1980)

**Virtual Text:** The concept of the *virtual text* is important to interpretive community theory. This is the “metatext” that a community uses in its interpretive tasks. The *virtual text* could be considered the “rule book” for interpreting content within a community. Some members are more versed in the intricacies of a community’s virtual text (*personal competence*) than other members.

**Meaning:** Meaning is the true center of study for the interpretive community, and the delineation of where meaning comes from is crucial. Lindlof outlines two arguments regarding the locus of meaning: presented meaning and constructed meaning. Presented meaning locates the meaning within the object, produced by the creator. As Fish noted, the goal of the reader in this paradigm is to discover the meaning that is buried within the artifact/text. Presented meaning makes the task of the researcher easier, for it can be operationalized, counted and coded. Cultural studies theorists propose a second type of presented meaning. In the cultural studies paradigm, there is a “deep meaning” of an artifact/text that represents the hegemonic interests of the ruling classes. Despite its seeming difference from the other form of presented meaning, the key feature is that the meaning is located in the text, and it exerts an influence upon the audience member. (Lindlof, 1988).

A second meaning argument is preferred in the interpretive community construct: constructed meaning. “Central to constructed meaning is the idea that significance comes into being *in the articulation of a specific person-medium encounter* (which may occur

after the media reception event that precipitates it), but only within terms of a form of social reality.” (Lindlof, 1988)

**Types of interpretive communities:** Lindlof identifies four types of interpretive communities: genre, historical, institutional, and virtual.

Genre communities are most often used in studies of interpretive communities because of the literary background of the theory, and also because they are readily identifiable locations for meaning to develop along a communal line. A genre is a category of content that has certain distinguishing characteristics. According to McQuail, these are: collective identity related to purposes, form and meaning; this collective identity is developed over time and operates within certain conventions; and content within a genre will follow expected structures. (McQuail, 2000) Genre studies can center around groups of fans who congregate around a particular content, like a television show, or a musical style (Gencarelli, 1993). Examples of these include a study of discussants in an “X-Files” Internet forum, (Berg, 2002) and a study of the viewers of “Late Night with David Letterman.” (Schaefer & Avery, 1993).

Historical communities are interpretive communities that existed at some time in the past. Arriving at a sense of the existence of such communities is somewhat problematic, as research must rely on documentary evidence and close textual readings. For example, Stout (Stout, 1996) analyzed reports in Mormon publications since 1897 to identify how Mormons have been instructed about media use. Lindlof also used this form of textual analysis to analyze letters to the editors about Martin Scorsese’s *Last Temptation of Christ*. (Lindlof, 1996) The limitations of studying historical communities are obvious to one who has dealt with historical news accounts. Often, news reporting of

a time period may be lacking in sufficient detail, if there is data at all for a particular study. Lindlof noted the shortcomings of his study (1996), but insisted the data highlighted a conflict *between* communities of interpretation, rather than the strategies *within* a single group.

Institutional communities are communities that exist “outside the text/audience circuit.” (Lindlof, 2002) Journalists and their relationship with sources (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999) is an example of this type of research. Meyers focused on the community of Israeli journalists in *Israeli journalists as an interpretive memory community*. (Meyers, 2003) Religious institutions (denominations, sects, churches, para-church organizations) can be studied within this framework as well. (Metts, 1995)

Virtual communities are a relatively new development compared to the other three categories. With the spread of the Internet into almost every area of life, communities of interpretation have grown up in this virtual space that act in many ways similarly to actual, corporeal communities. (Lindlof, 2002) Berg’s study of the *X-Files* fan forum is an example of this area of research that deserves greater study.

	<b>Medium/Focus</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Genre</b>	Literature, subcultures	<i>X-Files fans, heavy metal music fans</i>
<b>Historical</b>	Historical documents	Early TV viewers, religious groups opposed to <i>The Last Temptation of Christ</i>
<b>Institutional</b>	Professions, organizations	Journalists, religious denominations
<b>Virtual</b>	Online discourse	Chat rooms, newsgroups, Web sites

**Table 1: Types of Interpretive Communities**

Interpretive community theory has shortcomings and critics, as does any theory. In the same text in which Lindlof proposed applying interpretive community theory to mass media, the theory was attacked. (Gunter, 1988) Primary criticisms of the theory are similar to criticisms of other theories that rely on qualitative methodology, that studies are not generalizable to a larger group of individuals. However, one of Gunter's main complaints was that interpretive communities flowed out of the semiotic tradition of interpretation studies, and thus might be guilty of subjective researcher interpretation, rather than audience interpretation (1988, p. 120). In the intervening decade, a sizable body of literature has developed using accepted qualitative methodology that should silence criticisms that compare the theory to the Rorschach-test theorizing of semiotics. Lindlof noted a lack of long-term ethnographic study of various communities while highlighting a research tendency toward the interview technique of qualitative research. Certainly, lengthy interaction with a single interpretive community in a research project would bring quality and depth of information not available to even the most in-depth interview method. However, such research is time-consuming and costly. As a side note, interpretive community theory is still awaiting mainstream acknowledgement, as it gets barely a mention in recent introductory theory texts (c.f., Griffin, 2003; West, 2004; Miller, 2005).

These few criticisms are not enough to defeat the theory, however. Indeed, interpretive community theory looks to have a long life of theoretical usefulness for a number of reasons, notably the fragmentation of the audience, the needs of the media

industry, the philosophical construct of the 21st century, and the emergence of the Internet and World Wide Web.

As audience analysts have noted, the concept of a “mass audience” is more and more becoming a convenient fiction useful for advertisers and those who sell ads (which may be an interpretive community in and of itself). The exponential growth in media channels across all platforms has highlighted the tendencies among individuals to watch/read/interact with media content that they identify with. Many of these new media content channels are constructed based upon *genre-specific* types of content (i.e., the Science Fiction Channel or the Game Show Network) rather than along traditional demographic lines (like many magazines).

The fragmentation of the audience leads directly to the second reason interpretive community theory will likely survive: the media industry needs to reach people. Although the audience is disappearing, media outlets still need to reach an audience. Advertisers need to move product, and media need advertising revenue to continue to generate content. The interpretive community concept, with its built-in assumptions and understandings about in-group rules, modes of interpretation, and schemata, is a natural theory to help media, advertisers and producers reach divergent audiences. It also fits well with recent developments in public relations and marketing (i.e., integrated marketing communications) that build upon relationship marketing and brand loyalty. Even the construction of a brand-specific audience can be viewed as an application of the interpretive community theory.

The prevailing philosophical standpoint of the 21st century also supports interpretive community theory. This theory comes out of the tradition of postmodern

thought that developed throughout the late 1900s which moved away from the modernist assumptions of external truth that could be observed and quantified and toward a construction of reality based on personal observation and interpretation. Stanley Fish was at the forefront of such postmodern thought in the literary theory tradition. The migration of his theory into mass media research should hearten those who have been seeking to elevate qualitative research on audience interpretations. Within the academy, such postmodern theoretical constructions have been ascendant in the humanities for several decades. There is no indication that theory development is going to put this particular philosophical genie back in the bottle, especially when developments like the interpretive community theory are so relevant to modern day reality.

Finally, the development of the Internet and World Wide Web support the continued development of interpretive community theory. For the first time in history, the Internet allows multiple, simultaneous, cross-global conversations to take place between people who express affinities for similar media content. And, more importantly, *these conversations are maintained and archived for future research!* While researchers have been able to study fragments of community through letters to the editors, or newspapers accounts, or occasional diaries, or interviews with small groups of community members, there has never before been such a database of raw material for research. Further, for the first time, the Internet actually allows individuals to participate in community in a concentrated way without having to *physically* participate in the community. This is an incredible boon for researchers, who can now observe critical aspects of interpretation, rule development, idioms, etc., outside the day-to-day existence of community members. The Internet's repository of community behavior might be likened to the Petri dish of the

biologist, allowing a culture specimen to grow and be observed apart from the natural habitat.

## **CONCLUSION**

The interpretive communities construct remains a ripe area for future developments. For one thing, the theory is relatively new to the media studies field. There is a paucity of literature explaining and defending its key features, and a relatively small sampling of studies that have been conducted using it as a framework. This is a promising statement for scholars interested in this theory. For media scholars, there is additional promise in this theory because it tracks so well with industry practices. As Douglas Rushkoff has noted in two recent television documentaries, media companies are increasingly targeting their messages to small groups of like-minded individuals. The interpretive communities construct can provide a theoretical underpinning and explanation for what is occurring when targeted groups receive the media messages. Advertising practitioners can certainly learn from, and contribute to, the development of the theory. By building these bridges to the practicing community, interpretive community scholarship may help to mend fences along the “green eyeshade/chi square” divide.

The quantitative arm of mass media research frequently expresses skepticism of qualitative measures, and this skepticism is often returned in kind. But there are possibilities for quantitative research methods to be useful in the interpretive community framework. Lindlof mentions semantic network analysis (2002) as a possible technique along those lines. Other uses of survey instruments to gather data to strengthen a primary qualitative analysis might also prove fruitful. As well, comparison and contrast between

content analysis (quantitative) and interpretation (qualitative) could provide further insights into the ways individual interpretations vary from the presented meaning construct.

Finally, the future for interpretive communities is brightest in the new digital frontier, where individuals and small group audiences congregate along lines that are not merely demographic, but centered around experience and meaning. The interplay between new medium and old institution in shaping and reshaping communities of interpretation is also an avenue for further study. (Lindlof, 2002) Finally, a fuller study of the exact relationship between the medium and the interpretive community is an exciting prospect for the future of this theory.

But what of other theoretical fields? Does the presence of interpretive communities destroy or denigrate the work of uses and gratifications research, for instance? Does it negate the work of quantitative researchers? I think not. The quantitative paradigm has its uses. If we are trying to discover just who is watching or reading and what they think about certain things, a quantitative methodology may be best. But if we want to discover *why* they think those things, and *how* they might respond to a particular message, then the interpretive community construct proves useful. The trend in media audience analysis seems to be toward a focus on communities of interpretation. As such, there may be less of an emphasis on the quantitative in methodology. Similarly, interpretive communities does not *necessarily* downplay the contributions of other theoretical *genres*. Perhaps at some future point, interpretive communities and uses and gratifications may find common ground for a synthesis of study. If there are fields that might be threatened by interpretive communities, they would

seem to be the cultural studies theories, which rely on theories of power and oppression to promote their viewpoints. According to the interpretive community standpoint, meaning and interpretation do not arise from purely demographic groupings. Thus, the feminist theorist who supposes a deep meaning of a literary text that supports the patriarchal hegemony may find that the interpretive community theory denies such a meaning exists beyond the interpretive community of feminists. These types of questions have not been fleshed out yet in the literature, but await future publications.

## REFERENCES

- Berg, N. K. A. C. (2002). *Making sense of television: Interpretive community and "The X-Files" Fan Forum. An ethnographic study*. Unpublished PhD, University of Missouri Columbia.
- Berkowitz, D., & TerKeurst, J. V. (1999). Community as interpretive community: Rethinking the journalist-source relationship. *Journal of Communication*, 49(3), 125.
- Fish, S. (1980). *Is There a Text in This Class?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gencarelli, T. F. (1993). *Reading "Heavy Metal" Music: An Interpretive Communities Approach to Popular Music as Communication*. Unpublished PHD, New York University.
- Griffin, E. (2003). *A First Look at Communication Theory* (5 ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Gunter, B. (1988). Finding the Limits of Audience Activity. In J. A. Anderson (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook 11* (pp. 108-126). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Lindlof, T. R. (1988). Media Audiences as Interpretive Communities. In J. A. Anderson (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook 11* (pp. 81-107). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Lindlof, T. R. (1996). The Passionate Audience: Community Inscriptions of *The Last Temptation of Christ*. In D. A. a. J. M. B. Stout (Ed.), *Religion and Mass Media* (pp. 148-167). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lindlof, T. R. (2002). Interpretive Communities: An Approach to Media and Religion. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 1(1), 61-74.
- McQuail, D. (2000). *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*. London: Sage.
- Metts, W. C. J. (1995). *Just a Little Talk with Jesus: An Analysis of Conversational Narrative Strategies Used by Evangelical College Students*. Unpublished PHD, Michigan State University.
- Meyers, O. (2003). *Israeli journalists as an interpretive memory community: The case study of 'Haolam Hazeh'*. Unpublished Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.
- Radway, J. (1984). *Reading the Romance*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Schaefer, R. J., & Avery, R. K. (1993). Audience Conceptualizations of Late-Night with Letterman, David. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 37(3), 253.
- Stout, D. A. (1996). Protecting the Family: Mormon Teachings About Mass Media. In D. A. a. J. M. B. Stout (Ed.), *Religion and Mass Media: Audiences and Adaptations* (pp. 85-99). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- West, R. a. L. H. T. (2004). *Introducing Communication Theory: Analysis and Application* (2 ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.