

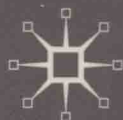
James Watson



Media Communication

An Introduction to Theory
and Process

Second Edition



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JAMES WATSON

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James Watson is a former journalist who has worked for many years in further and higher education, teaching a range of communications-related subjects. Currently he teaches Media Studies on the BA in Media and Communication, run in partnership between the University of Greenwich and West Kent College, Tonbridge – a course he helped design and develop. He was the first Course Director.

He is co-author with Anne Hill of *The Dictionary of Media and Communication Studies*, the 6th edition of which was published by Hodder Arnold in 2003. He is also a writer of fiction, having published several novels for young adults, including *Talking in Whispers* which won The Other Award and the Buxtehuder Bulle Prize for youth fiction. He has written for radio and had several plays broadcast by the BBC.

James Watson studied History at the University of Nottingham and took an MA in Curriculum Development in Higher Education at the University of Sussex. As a Page Scholar to the United States he conducted a study of communication and media studies courses at American universities.

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Introduction: Studying Media

Target readership

The readers I have had in mind while writing this book have been those like my own students, starting out on degrees or other higher education courses in communication, media and cultural studies. Some will already have academic qualifications in media-related subjects. Others will be studying the subject for the first time.

Though some will be straight from school or college, still academically sharp, we hope, despite their long lay-off from June till September (where they have been struggling in lowly-paid jobs for the means to continue their studies), others will be returning to study via access to higher education courses or coming direct from years in the workplace.

All will be eager for the challenge of a subject which has proved immensely popular at all levels of education. Most will be keen to learn new skills such as video and radio production, desk-top publishing, photography or website design. They will readily appreciate that practice needs to be supported by theory, that understanding must guide practice as practice must reinforce theory.

Content

This book provides a detailed overview of the ‘study’ part of courses in media communication. Throughout my teaching over many years I have urged a first principle in the study of communication, that it can only be meaningfully explored and understood if the *contexts* in which it takes place are taken into account. In Chapter 1, Setting the Scene: Media in Context, I have attempted to map, albeit briefly, the terrain where media operate.

Increasingly the media have found themselves positioned at the heart of cultural, social, political and economic contexts; and these contexts both influence

media performance and are influenced by it. The media are part of trends, responsive to them and often instrumental in publicising, and therefore influencing, the direction and extent of such trends.

It is vital to recognise that events have antecedents: they have a history, as does the manner in which the media cover those events. Although it has not been within the scope of this volume to investigate historical developments in the media, the importance of these – for further research on the part of the student – is frequently stressed; and this presupposes a view that students of media count among their communication skills competence in research methods.

Terminology: friend not foe

Study is itself situated in contexts, one of which, focused on in Chapter 2, The Language of Study, is that part of the linguistic map which shows signs and symbols: in our case, the terminology (some say jargon) of the subject. Unless the student is familiar with the special terms that have evolved in the study of communication, and then become common scholarly practice in discussing, describing and analysing, access to anything more than a superficial ‘reading’ of media texts, media processes and audience responses to those texts and processes will be limited.

At first sight, terminology – in any specialist subject – can appear off-putting. Yet familiarity and practice soon prove its usefulness. I have already used one term basic to our studies – *reading*. For the student of communication this means more than a simple exercise in reading words. It may include the reading of advertisements, for example, and in the context of such an exercise it implies skills in observation and analysis – of meaning-making – worthy of Sherlock Holmes. Indeed it might be argued that Holmes is not a bad role model for the study of communication (so long, I suppose, as his cocaine habit is overlooked).

The terminology of communication study is catholic and has been imported from a number of disciplines – cultural studies, economics, ethnography, film studies, linguistics, philosophy, political science, the study of organisations, psychology and sociology. It permits users to refer to concepts, theories and practices without having to explain them repeatedly, or have them explained, which would be the case if no readily recognisable terms existed.

We may, in discussing the news, refer to *gatekeeping* and *agenda-setting*, terms employed to describe complex media processes (see Chapter 5, The News: Gates, Agendas and Values). Their use is as unavoidable, and as necessary, as labelling your possessions, knowing people’s names or having a number on your door. Hikers lost on the moors in a fog are more likely to progress to safety if they understand the symbols (the terminology) on the map of the terrain.

The special language of communication offers more than mere signposting. It serves also as a framework for the development of understanding and a mechanism for critical analysis. It helps, for instance, to separate out, at least initially, the *denotational* aspects of any text from the *connotational*, the level of description, of identification, from the level of analysis: that is, it prompts us to recog-

nise the difference while at the same time suggesting that in any analysis it is advisable to set the scene (by working at the denotational level) before plunging into the more subjective realms of interpretation (the connotational level). As in all the best academic practices, theory works hand in hand with skills.

In brief, then, the language of study enables us to operate with confidence by reminding us what to look out for, whether we are studying the front pages of the tabloids, advertisements, TV soaps, movies, party political broadcasts, rap music or the latest fashions. It enables us to probe behind the surfaces of things, to ‘unmask’ appearances; to spot what is not said as well as what is – the hidden agendas of mass communication.

Starting with audience

Because the subject of media communication is so vast it is inevitable that media courses will vary in their structure and content. I have tried to take this into account, though most courses will deal with the five basic elements of media:

- *Texts*
- *Production*: the processes of message-making; of narratives and representation
- *Contexts*: social, political, economic; and involving institutions
- *Reception*
- *Technology*

Ideally these ought not be studied separately because they are obviously interactive and interdependent, but there is no getting away from the fact that study is inevitably *sequenced* and so is a book on study.

In a sense the study of media communication can be said to resemble a circular building with a number of entrances. Perhaps a more apt metaphor is the prism. Figure 1.1 is a handout I give to students to illustrate the different approaches to study while at the same time emphasising the connectedness of each perspective; as with the prism, viewing one side nevertheless permits illumination of all sides.

You can start with the nature of the medium itself, which would include a focus upon media technology and its impact or, as I have done, after presenting a contextual and terminological framework, elect to explore Response Theory, beginning with the nature of audience for media (Chapter 3, *The Audience for Media: Perspectives on Use and Response*).

This allows us to begin where ‘the student is at’, for everyone born in this Age of Information is a consumer of media, and has been since childhood. Students do not come to the subject, as they might if they were to take a course in nuclear physics, with little previous knowledge. They arrive with a history of media experience which is part of their own history and that of their family and friends.

It would seem productive to build on this knowledge, experience and awareness; and if motivation were needed, then the pleasure of consumption is likely to stir the necessary interest (after all, there are not many subjects where home-

inform, educate, entertain, and what else? The media are so prominent in any modern state, their influence extending far beyond local and national boundaries, that everyone, from presidents and prime ministers to pressure groups concerned about the impact of media on human attitudes and behaviour, insist on having a say in defining the purpose of media.

Essentially the media operate in what is defined as *public space* or the *public sphere*. In fact, in modern times, they arguably embody that space by being ‘the voice of the people’. Chapter 4 seeks to examine functions through the public roles that the media cast themselves in, and those which society affirms or questions.

Expectations about these roles are regularly, unavoidably, in conflict, and this conflict is best examined by focusing on how media actually perform: do the tabloids keep us fully informed? Of course in some things they keep us more than fully informed; but in other matters they are curiously silent. The task of the student of media communication is to ask why.

The importance of the News

So far the media scene will have been looked at through a wide-angle lens. We are at the point when we need to switch to the operational level of media production. In Chapter 5, *The News: Gates, Agendas and Values*, I have set out to examine, in close-up, the processes through which the raw material of news passes on its way to the public, via the press and broadcasting.

The news is important to us because it purports to represent ‘the world out there’: its realities. We need only pause for a moment to assess just how much of our knowledge of the world is *mediated* by newspapers, radio and TV. The pictures in our heads are pictures for the most part put there by the media; and our attitudes towards those pictures, our definition of their meaning – our recognition of their reality – owes much to what the media have selected, omitted, shaped and interpreted.

Perhaps more than any other media format, the news claims to represent reality, the way things are; and in that representation there is the underpinning assumption that some of those things represented are the way they should be. That underpinning we call *ideology*, a term defined in Chapter 1, and revisited in Chapter 2.

In our studies we will readily come to recognise the complexity of realities and that the media impose frames or grids upon those realities. They offer ‘versions’ of reality. In some cases, an active audience response may reject the media’s definition of reality or at least question it. The student of media soon appreciates that while news may look ‘natural’, that naturalness is ‘constructed’; and such constructs require careful examination.

Telling stories

It is not merely a quaint habit that journalists refer to ‘writing stories’. One might say that the world we recognise is made up of stories of one kind or another. It