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The Semiotics of Teaching with Reality TV: A Theory-Based Approach to Teaching and Modeling Communication Theory

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ABSTRACT

This article begins by establishing a rationale for not only teaching with reality television in the communication classroom, but also taking a theory-based approach to doing so. A theoretical framework for the pedagogical use of reality TV—semiotic theory, based on the work of Peirce—is presented. The discussion then moves to a specific outline of a sample classroom activity that demonstrates a semiotic approach, using the BRAVO TV website as a means of illustrating and teaching Cultural Studies Theory. The author concludes by qualifying the case for using reality TV as one—but not the only—means of teaching communication, and offers other alternative texts and media sources that can also help instructors illustrate abstract communication theories and concepts for their students.

Interest in reality television has exploded in the past few years; a genre that began with young-adult programming such as MTV's *The Real World* has developed its audiences, topics, and cultural outreach exponentially. While some researchers of this phenomenon, such as Nabi, Biely, Morgan & Stitt (2003), have dismissed reality television viewing as being merely typical of the voyeuristic American mindset, communication scholars are more and more frequently agreeing that something of more cultural significance than mere entertainment is indicated by the viewership and popularity of this type of programming. Researchers and cultural reporters variously argue that reality TV is manipulating audience's values, privileging the dominant culture, creating a new outlet/form for parasocial relationships, or changing expectations of interpersonal interactions and civility (see, for instance, Dyer, 2010; Kraidy & Sender, 2011; Rodriguez, 2011; Rose & Wood, 2005). Americans watch everything from *Bridezillas* to *Extreme Home Makeover* to *The Real Housewives of* [fill in the affluent city of choice] with passion and dedication, so naturally our interest as scholars and teachers is piqued, and our temptation to jump on this cultural bandwagon is considerable.

Reality TV is not only popular for mass audiences--it is also of interest to scholars/teachers for several reasons. First, many teachers already find it exciting, effective, and just plain fun to incorporate reality television into our classrooms. However, for teachers who

have never considered utilizing reality TV as a part of their classroom instruction, this essay also argues that reality TV can be extremely useful in helping students connect abstract theories with actual observable behavior—therefore making communicative concepts and theories even more intriguing and relevant for our students. Finally, the informed and deliberate use of reality TV in the classroom can be a way to apply sound theoretical perspectives in order to simultaneously demonstrate and extend scholarship in communication theory. Given this, we need to think carefully about the most appropriate pedagogical approaches and theory-based reasons for utilizing this genre as a part of our teaching. This article provides suggestions and guidelines for incorporating one particular perspective into the use of reality TV in a communication theory course. Although these suggestions are based on use in a sophomore-level general education course, several aspects of these exercises can be adapted for general speech courses at the high-school level or entry-level college course.

This article proceeds as follows: beginning with a brief review of semiotic analysis as one appropriate theoretical framework to guide the pedagogical use of reality TV, the discussion moves to giving examples of the indexical and symbolic use of reality television in the classroom. The article, then provides specific examples of programs that can be used to demonstrate communication theories and concepts, and breaks down one sample activity that utilizes a semiotic approach to teaching Cultural Studies theory. This essay concludes with suggestions for other kinds of artifacts that can complement the use of reality TV in the classroom so that students are not given the mistaken impression that communication is so easy to understand and master that they can simply watch TV and ‘get it.’

Semiotic Analysis: A Very Brief Introduction

The framework for taking this particular a theory-based approach to using reality television in the communication course and classroom is drawn from research on semiotics, which is essentially the study of verbal and visual communication as ‘signs.’ Based on the work of philosopher Charles Peirce, semiotic analysis (which is central to rhetorical studies but appears frequently in fields such as advertising and marketing in addition to communication studies), examines three functions of signs: 1) *Iconic* (the sign looks like what it represents; for instance, the little icon on a women’s room is supposed to resemble a woman); 2) *Indexical* (the sign indicates that some process or activity will take place or has already taken place; yield and stop signs tell us that we are supposed to direct our cars in a given way); 3) *Symbolic* (the sign has a deeper conceptual meaning we have learned or will learn; the Pepsi company was able to gain such recognition for its circular symbol with waves of red, white, and blue that the company does not even use the word ‘Pepsi’ in many ads utilizing the logo).¹ In one of his early essays, Peirce explains in more depth:

A regular progression of one, two, three may be remarked in the three orders of signs, Likeness, Index, Symbol. The likeness has no dynamical connection with the object it represents; it simply happens that its qualities resemble those of that object, and excite

analogous sensations in the mind for which it is a likeness. But it really stands unconnected with them. The index is physically connected with its object; they make an organic pair. But the interpreting mind has nothing to do with this connection, except remarking it, after it is established. The symbol is connected with its object by virtue of the idea of the symbol-using mind, without which no such connection would exist (<http://www.iupui.edu/~peirce/ep/ep2/ep2book/ch02/ch02.htm>).

Peirce saw this process as so essential to human consciousness that he indeed claimed “All thought . . . must necessarily be in signs” (p. 34). If we believe in the centrality of communication to human existence, then it seems logical to draw on a theory that claims its essentiality in understanding human thought.

To examine more closely how the semiotic perspective applies to utilizing reality TV as a teaching tool in the communication classroom, consider the following examples. We might consider *not* employing the iconic perspective if we are concerned that students are already too easily convinced that reality TV *is* reality (due to the edited, compressed, and even scripted nature of the genre, of course, this is rarely true, but less worldly students can confuse the two realities more easily). There are certainly a few cases in which the iconic perspective is useful; for instance, episodes of *John and Kate Plus 8* (a reality TV show chronicling the day-to-day interactions of a husband, wife, and eight children) show two iconic figures, a husband and wife, in frequent conflict. The dysfunctional relationship presented on-screen looks exactly like the reality of a family in tension (often painfully so).

The other two perspectives, however, might offer an even more insightful understanding of how to utilize reality TV as a teaching tool in the classroom—the *indexical* and the *symbolic* aspects of semiotics. By using this framework in combination with reality TV program excerpts, teachers can variously ask, “Does what’s going on here remind you of something we covered in Theory X?” (the *indexical* approach), or “Is there something represented here that you think we should resist or disagree with? Is there a hidden message here?” (the *symbolic* approach). This approach helps students link the abstract concepts and theories we teach in communication to observable, practical events more effectively in a memorable and accessible way. To demonstrate the potential use of the semiotic perspective in the classroom, we can review a sample activity designed to help students understand and utilize the theory of Cultural Studies. This particular exercise is an example of the *symbolic* approach, because it is focused on *helping students to understand ‘what lies beneath.’*

No Bravo, BRAVO: A Semiotic Approach Using Reality TV to Teach Cultural Studies Theory

This activity that invites students to review many examples of reality TV shows in light of Cultural Studies theory—a theory that examines the way in which mediated messages either establish hegemony (the power one social group has over another) or can be counter-read to resist the values of the dominant group in power.

Goals/Objectives

1. Students will be able to identify the basic concepts of Cultural Studies Theory.
2. Students will engage in the practice of ‘oppositional reading.’
3. Students will be able to define and differentiate among the concepts of dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional readings.
4. Students will be able to recognize examples of embedded cultural values in mass-mediated messages.

Courses

Communication Theory, Introduction to Mass Media/Media Literacy, Television and Film Studies, Rhetorical Theory (this exercise could also be used in a high-school or undergraduate public speaking course if the PowerPoint were revised to eliminate the specifics of Cultural Studies theory and just focused on how mediated messages affect audiences’ beliefs, values, and attitudes).

Resources Needed

Internet connection and ability for students to work in groups on laptops/desktops with Internet connection; PowerPoint/LCD projector

Rationale

The author chose this particular example of using reality TV to illustrate and teach a communication theory because Cultural Studies is often one of the more difficult perspectives for students to grasp, especially if they are members of the dominant cultural group. Doing this kind of in-class activity also provides students with the practice in critical thinking and theory application that they need later in the course to write their final analysis paper.

Activity Directions

The instructor first takes students through the basics of Cultural Studies theory in a PowerPoint presentation. This is a regular part of our communication theory course, so students are used to seeing the background/history of the theory, basic assumptions, basic concepts, and then doing an application of the theory of the day.

Once this content is covered, students are invited to get into groups of 4-5 and look online at the Bravo TV website at <http://www.bravotv.com/shows>.ⁱⁱ The students are asked to discuss in their group questions such as, what values are being consistently promoted by these reality programs? Who are their targeted audiences? Who benefits from promoting these values

to these audiences? What are the economic motives behind producing these kinds of reality TV programs? What cultural values promoted by these programs do and do not resonate with the group?

Students are given 10-15 minutes to discuss in small groups, and then report their findings back to the class as a whole. The instructor summarizes the key points and moves on to discuss the strengths and limitations of the theory.

Time Frame

The PowerPoint takes approximately 20 minutes to cover with students; discussion in small groups and then with the entire class takes 20-25 minutes. This activity is planned for completion within a 40-minute time period, but additional discussions or follow-up assignments could certainly fill a 50-minute time period.

This is certainly not the only activity, program, or theory that can benefit from the application of semiotic theory and reality TV. The following is a list of examples of other communication theories and concepts that have been successfully explained and demonstrated in an undergraduate communication theory class with the help of reality TV programs (these examples are primarily *indexical*, since they are used to *demonstrate the existence* of concepts taught within communication theories):

- Using the program “Millionaire Matchmaker” to illustrate the differences between covering-law, rules-based, and systems perspectives on communication (Matchmaker Patti Stanger has an unbending set of ‘rules’ that she requires her clients to follow to find their dream mate—who also happens to be very, very wealthy); students then determine their points of agreement and difference with Patti’s rules to create their own rules-based or systems theories of dating. This program could also be used in a high school or undergraduate public speaking course to reinforce more basic concepts such as self-disclosure and impression management.
- Using the program “Extreme Makeover” to illustrate the concept of the creation of self in Symbolic Interaction Theory (in this program, people receive the opportunity to have free plastic surgery based on their claims of how the procedures could change their lives; the MTV program “Totally Obsessed” is also useful but must be retrieved from online archives on the MTV website); students discuss how strongly the creation of a self-image is anchored to one’s physical appearance and the reactions of others to that appearance. This program could also be used in a high school or undergraduate public speaking course to provide evidence of more basic concepts such as the importance of non-verbal communication and impression management.

- Using the program “Intervention” (where addicted people are profiled, being told they will appear in a documentary, but are actually confronted in a group intervention led by the program’s hired facilitator/counselors, then are offered the opportunity for free treatment at a sponsoring rehabilitation center) to illustrate Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory. In particular, this program can be used to indicate the concept of ‘charmed’ vs. ‘strange’ loops; interactions between the addicted subjects and their families are viewed and discussed in light of the dysfunctional reasoning often used on both sides to justify unhealthy behavior, compared to the ‘charmed’ loops of message creation and interpretation that occur after the intervention. This program could also be used in a high school or undergraduate public speaking course to illustrate more basic concepts such as effective listening and providing/responding to feedback appropriately.
- Using the program “The Bachelor” (where various women compete for the attentions of one single man) to illustrate the various tensions explored in Relational Dialectics Theory; interactions between the bachelor and his various potential partners are examined for evidence of tensions such as the real vs. the ideal, autonomy vs. connectiveness, and novelty vs. predictability. This program could also be used in a high school or undergraduate public speaking course to demonstrate more basic concepts such as the transactional model of communication and shared vs. personal fields of experience.
- Using the program “Survivor” (where people from very varied backgrounds and even cultures are placed in a remote location and given ‘challenges’ to meet both individually and in teams) to illustrate Groupthink; team dynamics are discussed to determine where a team is failing to think beyond its prior experience, as well as to illustrate how a team under tension is more likely to engage in groupthink (as well as the tendency to ostracize members who do not get along and go along with the rest of the group). This program could also be used in a high school or undergraduate public speaking course to teach more basic concepts such as group roles and team working.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of the communicative concepts and theories that reality TV can illustrate, but it does demonstrate that reality TV has a clear semiotic application in our classrooms.

Whether we take the *indexical* or the *symbolic* approach, then, semiotic analysis provides a sound theoretical grounding for our use of reality television in a communication classroom. Like any other tool or technique, however, reality TV certainly can be—and perhaps is already—overused as a way to ‘jazz up’ our classes; therefore, a list of other potential ‘signs’ that can help us explain and illustrate communication theories and concepts follows next.

What Else is There? Semiotic Alternatives to Using Reality TV Programs

One good reason to limit our use of reality television as a teaching tool is very practical. Chances are that psychology, sociology, and social work classes are utilizing these same programs to help teach their theories and concepts. Therefore, if reality TV is all that we use, we will probably be encouraging our students to disengage from, not engage in, theory-based and conceptual discussions.

A second good reason for limiting our usage of this genre of programming as an exemplar of communication is that if we limit our use of reality TV in our teaching, we can better enable our students to use reality TV as their own 'space' for exploring communication theories and concepts, perhaps in course individual papers or individual and group presentations. A sample assignment description designed to allow students their own 'read' of reality TV programming is as follows:

Individual Research Paper: You will conduct research on the theory that is of greatest interest to you and apply it to a naturally-occurring event, popular culture artifact, famous person, etc. to write an 8 -10 page research paper applying the theoretical and conceptual frameworks discussed in class (8 -10 pages of *text*, not counting cover page and bibliography). Your research must include a complete bibliography of at least five sources **cited in the text of your paper** (online publications and sources count for only half value, so a bibliography using only online sources must have at least 10 entries).ⁱⁱⁱ These must be scholarly sources (such as journals and textbooks/research publications in the field of communication studies, psychology, sociology, education, etc.). Your course text does **not** count as one of your required bibliography entries, although you should cite it if you use information from the textbook in writing your paper. This assignment will be divided into several stages; your professor will establish due dates for your proposal, rough draft, and final draft.

As a part of your grade for this assignment, you will prepare a 5-10 minute 'trade show' presentation which summarizes the following: 1) the event/person/artifact/group under study; 2) review of theoretical/conceptual frameworks applied; 4) research conclusions about the communication dynamics of the group under study; 5) suggestions for further study and research. You will be required to create a visual for this presentation (could be a PowerPoint on your laptop, a poster board, a clip from a relevant video, a display of objects—whatever you think will best help to intrigue the audience and illustrate the topic of your paper).

Although students are not required to analyze a reality TV program, they often find this a very manageable artifact to examine in an undergraduate communication theory course; therefore, they have a wider range of programs/artifacts to choose from if the instructor is *selective* in using examples in everyday class discussions.

Perhaps an even better reason to use reality TV selectively in the communication course/classroom is that we should model the broad-ranging interests and scholarship that we hope our students will demonstrate in the course. Examples of other kinds of ‘signs’ that can serve a parallel function to reality TV programs are as follows:

- Online dating sites
- Self-assessments (instruments and online quizzes)
- News stories, newscast clips, online articles
- Company websites/ads
- Blogs
- Transcripts of political speeches
- Contemporary and classic novels
- Artists and gallery shows

As with any new cultural event or experience, reality television programming offers an exciting addition to our discussions of communication theories and concepts. As experienced teachers know, however, the best-engaged students are those who are given a diverse range of ways to explore communication. The purpose of this essay has been not only to offer ideas and examples for those interested in utilizing reality television, but also to present a theoretical perspective for the more informed and deliberate use of reality television—and the many other cultural artifacts well within the reach of both teachers and students.

ⁱ A very accessible discussion of semiotics for high school and undergraduate students can be found in Borchers’s (2006) text on rhetorical theory, specifically Chapter 10 on Rhetoric, Media, and Technology.

ⁱⁱ Because BRAVO features so much more reality TV programming than other networks, this website provides a convenient place for students to evaluate a number of reality TV programs in one listing. The nature of BRAVO’s reality TV programming, which often emphasizes lifestyles of the rich and famous (or the wanna-be rich and famous), also allows students to see readily the value-laden aspects of reality TV.

ⁱⁱⁱ In my classroom, any online source, even journal articles found through EBSCO, counts for a half-credit. Students usually have little or no difficulty finding sufficient sources once we conduct an online database session early in the semester.

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