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ABSTRACT

Specific social groups express themselves through their own particularized media. For example, "MS" magazine directs its communication to feminist readers, and as a part of this, regularly reprints advertisements and news clipping taken from mainstream media in its "No Comment" section. This section provides opportunities for "oppositional decoding," or the ability of a reader to understand the intended meaning of discourse, but to decode the message in a contrary way. Examples of media selections that might be found in the "No Comment" section are those that treat women in terms of their husband, regard women as unimportant to their husbands, exploit pictures of women, use sexual entendres or puns to sell goods and services, suggest that women enjoy sexual violence or abuse, illustrate male dominance, stereotype differences between boys and girls or men and women, depict women as stupid, recommend that women improve their bodies to attract or keep men, portray women as men's property, or mock, challenge, or condemn feminism. The consistent oppositional decoding of these images of women and of the relationship of women and men helps to maintain the social practices and structure of feminism, but does not necessarily change either the encoding or decoding process taking place within mainstream ideology. Perhaps changing major ideological systems cannot occur without access and commitment to an alternative, oppositional definition of reality, and alternative publications of specific cultural groups offer ways in which oppositional thinking may be taught and learned. (SRT)

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OPPOSITIONAL DECODING AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE

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OPPOSITIONAL DECODING AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE

Attention has increasingly been paid in the last two decades to the way that social groups express their unique cultural styles--their visions, ideals, frustrations--in their own particularized media.[1] Thus, these media speak a language significantly different from that of mainstream media. Conversely, mainstream media necessarily articulate--and hereby legitimate--dominant ways of seeing, feeling, judging. More recently, scholarly literature has also emphasized that differentiated social groups may actively and self-consciously "play" with the ever-available texts of that dominant culture. Attention is being paid, then, not only to the fact that events and objects can be heterogenously "encoded," but also to the fact that a single encoding can be variously "decoded." These two processes are rarely symmetrical, in contradiction to the implications of the classic linear model of communication.

These two principles have been elegantly elaborated in cultural theory, and especially in critical studies. On the other hand, with rare exceptions (one is David Morley, 1980a), practical implications for "real" audiences are rarely unraveled. The efforts of social groups to construct emotionally and intellectually satisfying alternative cultural forms which give meaning and significance to their own styles and strategies are not nearly so well analyzed as the more hegemonic mass media. Secondly, while there is admission at the theoretical level that texts cannot be reduced to the conscious intentions of their producers, most communications research continues to study the relationship of text and author, not text and reader.

To study the actual communication practices of a group in its own context, this essay looks at the No Comment pages of Ms magazine to see how readers

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respond to messages from what, at least from their vantage, is the dominant ideology. Briefly, the No Comment section reprints reader-submitted advertisements and news clippings taken from other media; what these items have in common is that the Ms audience regards them as insulting or offensive to women.

Specifically, I regard the No Comment department as an example of what Stuart Hall (1980b) calls "oppositional" reading. Ms' practice of bracketing these items is not simply a recasting of what are taken to be their source-intended meanings, but also is a repudiation of them. After describing the kinds of messages typically held up for group scrutiny in No Comment, I will speculate on the significance of these symbolic activities to Ms readers taken as a group. Finally, I will consider the implications of this analysis for the model of communication itself.

OPPOSITIONAL DECODING

The semiotic notion of polysemy holds that at the "moment" of reception, multiple meanings may be read into (or out of) a given text; the relation of signifier to signified is arbitrary. But dominant media, especially television, create a set of "preferred" readings. Speaking of television messages, Hall notes that "they never deliver one meaning; they are, rather, the site of a plurality of meanings, in which one is preferred and offered to the viewers, over the others, as the most appropriate." Hall adds, "This 'preferring' is the site of considerable ideological labour" (1976, p. 3). Indeed, the dominant ideology, despite hegemonic processes, is continually being contested.

Hall describes the "performative rules--the rules of competence and use or logic-in-use which actively seek to enforce or prefer one semantic domain," presumably that of the dominant ideology, over another (1980b, p. 134). But,

the privileged readings are not wholly determining; oppositional readings are possible. Although the fact that Hall devotes only the last paragraph of his article on "Encoding/Decoding" to oppositional decoding would seem to undercut its significance, Hall mentions that "it is possible for a viewer perfectly to understand both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a globally contrary way. He/she detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference" (1980b, pp. 137-38).

With similar intent in referring to mass media images, but using very different terms, Lillian Robinson (1983, p. 322) says:

> My own assumption is that the range of possible reactions is a great deal widerthan our mechanical metaphors would imply. Certainly, some members of the audience simply assimilate whatever the media expose them to, allowing the images to desensitize them to their own experience. But others transform what they see, making it actually functional in their lives--to provide social alternatives or solve problems in ways that are very different from those suggested by the media models themselves. And many people, I am convinced, consciously resist the media, either by withdrawing from their assigned role as audience-consumer or by actively struggling against the ideas and images projected.

But Robinson adds, "What is needed, instead of these assumptions and convictions, is scholarship about how the masses to whom mass culture is addressed make use of the images, the information and the myths the culture generates.... (R)esearch of this sort is a necessary basis for long-term resistance" (1983, p. 322).

Again, I will argue that, without at all denying the potential validity and usefulness of Robinson's proposal, scholars need not merely "assume" that resistance occurs. Such resistance, or "oppositional decoding," does not occur

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among the "masses" (to repeat the term that Robinson uses ironically), although certainly people at many points in their lives do recode messages, either because they disagree with, dislike, or do not want to hear the message as intended. We have all done this, silently or verbally, as children, as teenagers, as adults. But on one hand, "mass communication" depends on most people, for most of the time, essentially responding to mass media through the preferred code. On the other hand, cultural groups certainly contest not only their own presentation in the "mass media," but also other kinds of mediated messages. To understand either process, we must look neither to the individual viewer (which leads to the over-psychologizing of the uses and gratifications approach) nor to "the masses" (the effects approach, which simplistically and excessively empowers the text), but rather to the social group. It is the group, in its own communications, that challenges the preferred readings, that uncovers hidden structures, implicit mythologies and naturalized ideological operations--albeit inevitably within the framework of its own structures, mythologies and ideology. This essay argues that this is what happens in the No Comment department of Ms.

Before proceeding with the analysis I must also anticipate a potential concern with my application of "oppositional." For Hall, here as before following Parkin's lead, posits a third "negotiated" code. Falling in between the dominant hegemonic and the oppositional code, the negotiated code combines adaptive and oppositional elements.[2] According to Hall, the negotiated code accords a privileged position to dominant definitions, but allows for some deviant applications, particularly in relation to the decoders' position. Hall says that decoding within the negotiated version "acknowledges the legitimacy

of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules--it operates with exceptions to the rule" (1980b, p. 137).

First, it should be noted that Parkin's tri-partite value systems and Hall's tri-partite coding system constitute logical, not sociological, maps of meaning. Still, given the spectrum of political philosophies represented among American feminists, I can predict criticism of this essay for according Ms readers an "oppositional" status rather than the more negotiated (co-optable) one. After all, Ms readers have been described as "insufficiently radical," "overly liberal," and "entirely middle of the road." One concedes the irony of applying Marxist (although not "vulgar Marxist") constructs to a thoroughly middle class movement. Yet, without here defining American feminism or the goals of the women's liberation movement, this essay takes the position that the bracketing by Ms readers of every example of the exploitation of women's bodies to sell goods and services as "sexist" is as oppositional as, to use Hall's example, the British (Marxist) shop steward who, hearing a news broadcast, interprets every mention of the "national interest" to mean "class interest." It may be said that the politics of Ms are not radical; even that its articulation of problems and solutions are naive. Furthermore, for the most part, the magazine does not challenge (indeed it uses) the dominant modes of representation. The dominant processes of signification are not critiqued or resisted by Ms practices. But the fact that not everyone accepts the "liberal" social-political theory and definition of the problem/solution articulated in Ms does not mean that it is not feminist. It does take gender as both explanatory and problemmatic. Moreover, Ms translations and restructur-

ings are consistent; they paradigmatically repudiate the meanings, practices, and beliefs of the larger social world. Even Morley, while privileging class position, admits, "Other formations--for example, gender and immediate social context or cultural milieu--may also have a formative and structuring effect, not only on which specific discourses will be in play in any specific text/reader encounter, but also in defining the range and the repertoire of performance codes" (1980b, p. 173). Hall, in his own discussion of "the impact of the feminisms" on work of the Birmingham Centre, says that feminism "has displaced forever any exclusive reference to class contradictions as the stable point of reference for cultural analysis;" it denies a wholly economic or "productivist" meaning to the term "material condition" (1980a, pp. 38-39). It is with this in mind that I now examine No Comment as "oppositional."

THE 'NO COMMENT' DEPARTMENT OF MS MAGAZINE

The No Comment section first appeared in the September 1972 issue (the magazine's third issue), and was a monthly feature until 1982. Since then it has appeared irregularly and in a different format, although a staff researcher says that entries submitted by readers could fill up the entire magazine each month (personal conversation with Linda Bennett, March 1986). The department primarily consisted of print advertisements, but items also came from newspaper and magazine articles and photographs, business letters and memos, brochures and manuals, billboards and posters, professional and trade journals, and books and dictionaries. Each issue, the section, displayed on one or two pages toward the "back of the book," reprinted six to twelve items. (Some specific ways in which these items "put down" women will be summarized below).

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Several aspects of the No Comment section make it worthy of critical attention, not the least of which is the fact that, as mentioned above, readers themselves voluntarily submitted the materials. Readers were instructed to send the entire page from the "offending" newspaper, brochure, or letter to the magazine offices in New York; those items selected by magazine editors for publication "credited" by name both the original source and the submitter. Granted, for the most part, Ms magazine is linguistically and structurally coded in terms of the dominant strategies. It does not look out of place along side of mainstream media displayed at the corner drugstore. But the No Comment section--providing as it does access to readers--may also be seen as part of an ongoing, if partial, attempt to operate the magazine oppositionally. At the least it is consistent with the magazine's attempt to run itself without highly sophisticated (patriarchal) bureaucratic hierarchies.

In some cases, multiple readers submitted an identical item. For example, the March 1982 (p. 74) issue reprinted an advertisement from the Washingtonian which had apparently dismayed at least 26 readers. (This ad, for a firm selling security systems, claimed "Unfortunately, when a burglar strikes he always winds up taking your most valuable items and leaves behind the items you wouldn't mind doing without." Prominently featured in the ad was a photograph of a women, in curlers and bathrobe, gagged and bound. Nearby, a desk drawer had clearly been emptied.) Likewise, 43 people submitted a quote by a General William Westmoreland, published in Parade and The Family Weekly, in which he said that for women in attend West Point is "silly" because they deprive men of the limited positions there (March 1977, p. 112).

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Moreover, the items come from a very wide range of places, literally across the world, from medical journals, large and small newspapers, textbooks from several fields, office manuals from several industries, mail-order catalogs, etc. For example, the August 1980 (p. 96) page includes an excerpt from a computer textbook, an article from the Oregonian, an ad from the Ottawa Citizen, and an ad from the Salt Lake Tribune (reading, "DAD, KIDS--COME BOWL A LINE--while mom prepares dinner"). Indeed, in view of Ms' claim to attract and speak for large numbers of women who share their vision but still manage to live out a variety of roles, the very diversity of sources may make the point--and again to Ms this would be a point of pride--that the Ms audience reads everything from computer texts to the Salt Lake Tribune.

Entirely absent, however, were items from "men's" magazines and from hard-core pornography. Presumably it is not that Ms readers do not read these magazines or do not object to them. Rather they assume that their oppositional energies are better directed in re-casting items from more widely accepted "mainstream" media. Certainly many feminists are very much concerned with the nasty, brutal images that dominate the pornographic magazines, some women believing even that these materials encourage or precipitate anti-social and explicitly anti-woman behavior. But others take the position that if changes in the (national) status of woman are marked by her image in the dominant mass media, then the challenge becomes monitoring media like Family Weekly and Parade. It is in these that the reigning understanding of hierarchies of power and status are embedded; and it is to the implicit but powerful distribution of respect and deference in these that feminists must sensitize themselves. It may be noted that none of the offensive items pictured black women, confirming

feminists' belief that the patriarchal power structure dares not mock or insult blacks in the ways it does women.

An even more significant feature of the department is that, by definition, the items were submitted and reprinted without explicit comment. Occasionally (in cases of extensive text), particularly insulting passages were underlined or circled. But the implication is that, first, no one can mistake what these messages--and their original sources--are intentionally saying about women. Secondly, since all Ms readers will readily understand why these messages are offensive, it might only compound the injury to have to "explain" them. Whether or not it is true, Ms readers posit that the contents are transparent (and powerful).[3] They take these texts not as hollow, but already very much "filled in" by the dominant ideology. In Marshall McLuhan's terms, the messages in their original contexts are "hot," thus enabling their own "cool" reframing. Of course, a shared interpretation is also enabled both by the fact that what is taken to be problemmatic about these items has already generally been de-naturalized (deconstructed) by/for these readers as a group. These discrete messages then become further "obvious" when wrenched from their context and bracketed, in combination and over time. (The Ms audience has chosen to ignore what might be further salient about the relation of these elements to the "structured relations" embodied in their original context.)

Individual Ms readers may have slightly varying translations of and explanations for the texts they find; here again we return to the (constrained) polysemic quality of communication. Hall's conception of decoding should not be taken to specify an exact number of readings for each text. Given some range in degree and type of commitment to feminism (or differences in interpretation

of what feminism means), readers' responses may vary. Unfortunately from the standpoint of academic research, the nonverbal quality of the Ms response can reveal neither readers' exact translations nor the intensity of their repudiation. All that we have is a passing reference by Ms editors, in another context, to the No Comment materials as "nutty or enraging" (July 1977, p. 48). This is an odd pairing of adjectives that is hardly useful.

The practical organization of No Comment also permitted such combining of items without regard to the differing degrees to which they articulate oppressive systems. Many items simply relied on double entendres, puns, and sexually-loaded variations on classic aphorisms. But other items were apparently meant to be taken literally, and as such should seriously challenge feminist readers to expose their ideological implications. For example, the February 1980 (p. 104) issue includes an advertisement for a furniture refinishing company, taken from The Office magazine, reading "It happened in the boss' office, overnight, without removing a thing." But on the same page is an advertisement from the Fort Myers News Press in which a $30 "collectors handkerchief" is described as "Made of linen in China by young girls whose eyesight was permanently impaired by the fineness of the work."

It may be that the readers have decoded the mass media messages fairly "liberally:" an item is intended as a joke, but it "really" dramatizes men's continuing insensitivity to the equal intelligence of women. Or it may be that readers have decoded the messages more "radically:" an item "really" exposes oppressive structures of capitalistic patriarchy. Because this paper is not itself a deconstructive reading of Ms, it does not attempt to unravel the implications of this range of messages and their potential decodings; but

either way, the fact of these images' re-publication in <u>Ms</u> bespeaks of an oppositional reading. That is, despite this admixture of images and the ambiguity about the specific interpretations made by individual readers, No Comment pages do provide evidence of a shared map of meaning which enables relatively coherent and stable, if unspoken, responses for the group. Or, to return to Hall's language and put the case more strongly, one could argue that given the audience members' commitment to a feminist discourse, and given the magazine's status as a relatively specialized magazine (let's say, compared to <u>Newsweek</u>), the <u>Ms</u> presentation "prefers" new decodings, which most <u>Ms</u> readers will probably accept.

There is also silent recognition that while <u>Ms</u> readers are offended by these messages--offended enough to submit them--most mass media consumers who see them in their original context will not be offended, will not particularly attend to them, may even be amused by them or applaud their sentiments. That is, as "obviously" wrong as they seem to <u>Ms</u> readers, they would either not "appear" or would appear "naturally" right and common-sensical to their audiences in the intended coding. Furthermore, the very act of capturing images from the wider mass media is a way of contesting what "they" say about "us," of saying that we do not accept what "they" say about "us." This sense of we/them becomes part of the resistance.

Especially because the magazine required neither submitters nor readers to analyze the items, to describe or even categorize them, the <u>Ms</u> audience responds with that "click" of instant comprehension. For example, a page from a Department of the Army Field Manual advised soldiers to treat natives like human beings and to "respect personal property, especially their women." <u>Ms</u>

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readers do not stop and self-consciously say, "the government treats women as property." Perhaps this, or something to that effect, is what they would say, if forced to articulate their re-interpretation. But in the context of No Comment, readers can read it and immediately "know." Finally, the fact that readers and staff were not encouraged to comment saved them from having to make (or argue about) obvious, heavy-handed ideological responses. It may be important to Ms readers that they can even respond to certain items with a laugh, albeit a laugh tinged with horror or bitterness; they can still claim to have a sense of humor.

What this indicates is that, on one hand, both the encoding/decoding processes within the dominant culture and the double decoding process of the Ms audience have been normalized; it has become habitualized and routinized. At the same time, if the Ms audience need not be self-conscious about its specific code-in-use, it "knows" that its maps and codes fundamentally contest maps of the dominant social order.

PATTERNS IN NO COMMENT CONTENT

Examination of a decade of monthly entries suggests that the bulk fall into various categories; the following list is descriptive, but neither exhaustive nor ranked:

> *treating women in terms of their husbands, such as an article headlined "Drew Lewis' Wife Survives Crash;" the survivor herself is a state representative.
>
> *regarding women as unimportant to their husbands; such as an ad which has a man telling a friend that the "brunette" I introduced you to is my wife--but no hurry in getting her back.
>
> *exploiting pictures of women (clothed or not) to sell goods and services; such as an ad for a swimming pool vacuum cleaner, which prominently featured two well-endowed blondes.

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*using sexual entendres and sexually-loaded puns to sell goods and services; or making jokes about women's bodies; such as a sign reading, "If your husband is a breast or leg man, ask for my chicken parts."

*presenting wild theories about women's bodies as scientific theory; such as a claim in a physiology article that "menstruation is the uterus crying for lack of a baby."

*suggesting that women enjoy sexual violence or abuse, or that beating women is fun or unproblemmatic; such as a billboard reading, in total, "Beat your Wife."

*illustrating male dominance; such as a photograph of the representatives--all males--of seven women's magazines.

*stereotyping differences between boys and girls; such as description of a museum's tours: girls see the doll collection and boys visit the fort.

*depicting women as stupid or silly, such as an ad reading, "We taught our data entry system to speak a new language: Dumb Blond."

*stereotyping differences between women and men, such as a brochure suggesting that the Lady of the house might find a speakerphone useful when she is holding the baby while stirring a pot, while the Man uses it while taking notes on an important phone call.

*recommending that women improve their bodies to attract/ keep men, such as an ad for a health spa suggesting that a matron in curlers might "lose" her husband to another woman.

*mandating and legitimating differential privileges, such as a memo announcing that male employees are entitled to an hour for lunch, women get a half-hour.

*portraying women as men's property, such as an insurance company ad headlined, "Priceless Possessions. . . Your Wife and Children."

*mocking, challenging, or condemning feminism, such as a church sign reading, "Adam's Rib Plus Satan's Fib Equals Women's Lib."

OTHER FEMINIST RESPONSES TO MEDIATED IMAGES

Two other points are relevant to the magazine's decision to run the department. First, the magazine is not the first feminist periodical to print other media's comments about the movement and about feminist media. Already in the 1860s, suffrage periodicals such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony's Revolution regularly included "Straws in the Wind" and "What they say about us" as ways of marking the shifts (or lack thereof) in status of the new breed of strong-minded womanhood which the weekly paper dramatized and advocated (Steiner, 1979).

A major thrust of the more modern women's liberation movement has been to indict mass media representations of women as both false and demeaning; such criticisms are found not only in the feminist media but also in overt--but highly symbolic--activities, such as picketing magazine offices, burning offensive materials, boycotting advertisers. Indeed, Lillian Robinson claims that "the militant concern with media images on the part of an entire spectrum of social movements has, consciously or not, been influenced by the initial feminist approach to media" (1983, p. 308). Certainly political, social and cultural movements have long been immensely concerned with the mass mediated image of their goals and membership; they have also monitored mass media for signs of change. And it seems that the same "categories" are often contested by other groups, such as the implication of weakness, silliness, stupidity.

More recently, a bi-monthly magazine called New Woman has been inviting readers to submit quotes for its "Swap the Old Lady for a New Woman" page. These quotes, nearly always from well-known people, are divided into three sections: "Sounds Like an Old Lady" (Prince Rainier: "I must be the boss, or

else I'm not a man"); "Sounds Like a New Woman" (Karen Black: "Strong men prefer strong women. It's only the sloshy ones who are afraid of being dominated by a woman"); and "A Thump on the Head to" (Oregon Governor Bob Straub: "There's only two things wrong with women: Everything they do and everything they say.") (All from Sept.-Oct. 1976, p. 9).

In 1980 Ms also established a "One Step Forward" department, reprinting things "that prove change possible--and keep optimism alive." The inaugural page spotlighted "positive images of grown-ups and children," according to a brief introduction by editor Letty Cottin Pogrebin (December 1980,p. 108). Ms has run several articles on women who work within mass media institutions, and on the image of women in the media; it also uses film and TV reviews. Gloria Steinem, editor of Ms, wrote for TV and several national publications before co-founding her own, and says she still spends hours composing mental letters to the editor and "talking back to the TV" (1981, p. 111).

But, as it turned out, the "positive" department has not appeared nearly as often as the "negative" one. Perhaps readers could not find many proofs of change. More likely, readers were not as inspired to send them in, or experience greater ambiguity about what constitutes improvement.

SUSTAINING GROUP IDENTITY THROUGH OPPOSITIONAL DECODING

Indeed, having established that these images of women and of the relationship of women and men have been consistently decoded, if decoded deviantly from the perspective of the encoders, this essay can now proceed to speculate on how the decoded content issues into the structure of social practices of the group. This "use" should not be described in simplistic psychological or behavioral terms. Still, the question is why it might be satisfying to attend to these

ever-present markers of women's low social status or of their status merely as sexual objects, and to the hegemonic structures responsible for maintaining women's status.

The Ms editorial staff itself remarked upon the immense popularity of the feature, in the course of introducing, in an issue celebrating the magazine's fifth anniversary, a kind of international olympics of No Comment. The editors awarded prizes for their "favorites." For example, an Ayn Rand Free Enterprise Award went to designer Bill Blass, for justifying his line of genital deodorants: "Honey, if there's a part of the human body to exploit, you might as well get into it." The editors suggested, "Perhaps the sight of this nutty or enraging stuff in a feminist context is a relief in itself. Perhaps a reader's act of mailing it off to a sympathetic place is a minor catharis" (July 1977,p. 48).

But aside from the therapeutic value of sharing insulting texts with the rest of the community, it appears that bracketing such items in one's own expressive medium might serve several additional purposes. Readers might initially argue that they submit items for the sake of those not yet fully committed to the cause--to convince those on the fence of the ongoing need for struggle. But, most generally and centrally, the activity is itself a way of giving shape and meaning to the experiences of the group, what sociologists call marking a group's normative boundaries. Here we see a [illegible] group's attempt to demarcate its world view from that of the dominant culture. Joli Jensen's normative reference to popular culture is relevant here: "The world we live and act in is given shape, form, and meaning through our symbolic constructions; in turn, these symbolic constructions offer us worlds in which

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to dwell, when the lights go down, the coin falls in the jukebox, the page is turned" (1984, p. 108). Yet, although culture is not reflective, it is reactive. It responds--actively. The items also constitute a fairly comprehensive definition of what the readers are not. The *Ms* reader is not dumb or silly; she is not her husband's property; she does not measure herself in terms of her breasts; and does not sell her body. In some sense, engaging in oppositional practice articulates and dramatizes an oppositional identity. Conversely, women who are not willing to see themselves in these oppositional ways when they attend to other media--women who do not resist these implied practices and beliefs--are "them," not "us."

The expressive activity of No Comment may be further sub-divided into more specific functions. First, it may remind readers of changes in their own paradigm. That is, it allows them to recognize the point when they themselves may have been less politicized, when they might have decoded using the dominant performance rules, thereby entirely "missing" the insult. Secondly, it serves as a reminder that messages which are essentially "politically" pornographic, or which violate women's sense of identity and integrity are not limited to the pornographic magazines, but are also found in daily newspapers, family magazines, and mail-order catalogs. In fact, the more salient political battles may have to be waged in these arenas--not the ones at the extremes. Thirdly, the items show again what feminists have long believed, that dominant mass media do ideological work, and that, regardless of media "effects" in the behavioral sense, their content is problemmatic and should be struggled against.

Finally, the dominant ideology emphasizes that "some things have changed," having immediately forgotten that it was feminists who struggled for that

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change. Certain feminist goals have been accomplished but then so integrated into the fabric of the dominant culture that feminists' work has been rendered invisible. Therefore these No Comment items encourage converts to continue to believe in and work actively for their oppositional definition of the world. The items instantiate readers' sense of continuing oppression, constituting visible data; as such they provide a focus for resistance. The process of bracketing is a challenge; to engage in this symbolic repudiation is both part of the feminist vision and an inspiration for further commitment.

This is not to claim that such oppositional decoding directly changes either the encoding or decoding processes which take place within the dominant ideology. Those who themselves engage in oppositional practices do not claim that their internally-communicated deconstructions affect dominant practices. On the other hand, they might argue that such oppositional strategies work to negotiate and bolster the identity of the group as such, and that a thereby-strengthened social group can then take up more effective efforts at intervention. David Morley quotes MacIntyre as saying: "becoming class conscious is like learning a foreign language; learning a whole new way of conceptualizing one's social situation and giving entirely different meanings to one's actions" (1974, p.11). This suggests that challenging and changing major ideological systems, whether these are seen in terms of gender or class, cannot occur without access and commitment to an alternative, oppositional definition of reality.

Finally, it should be noted that this approach to Ms readers as engaging in oppositional decoding is not the same as Janice Radway's very significant work on mass culture audience decodings (1984); here she persuasively argues that the patriarchal surface of romance novels conceals a "womanly

subtext" which enables women readers to interpret the contents "against the grain." She suggests that an understanding of what reading such novels means to readers may illustrate how often and how extensively women have been able to resist dominant practices of patriarchal signification. Again, oppositional reading is not reading "against the grain," but rather a fairly politicized repudiation of the grain. Still, to the extent that both reading practices occur, one need not be cynically pessimistic about the effects of modern capitalistic mass culture. Thus, this paper nears its conclusion with the point at which Radway began a recent essay (1986):

> (I)f mass culture does indeed allow for differential interpretation and use, if particular groups can adapt messages designed by others for their own purposes, it is conceivable that the ideological control achieved by any particular mass culture form may not be complete.... (T)hey might also successfully use those forms to analyze their material situation and to express their discontent with it. If this is true, there remains some hope that resistance and discontent might be developed into a more deliberate opposition to dominance.

CONCLUSION

The symbolic activity of Ms readers in the No Comment department, then, has rich implications for the debate about the definition of communication. The transmission definition of communication, with its positing of a potentially "effective" linear movement of discrete content from sources to receivers who are separated by time and space and who are only vaguely connected in the reverse direction by a feedback loop, cannot account for what we find here: a social group which, on one hand, can understand the messages of the sources but which can also simultaneously recode and reconstitute those messages in its own terms, in the process of constructing and maintaining a

uniquely satisfying and meaningful world. To be sure this study is preliminary, focusing on one content area whose precise meanings from/to the audience cannot themselves be elaborated. Still, the very fact that this essay concerns itself with the way an audience interprets and uses texts suggests that, using a cultural model of communication, one can heed the admonition to integrate analysis of text and active audience.

Admittedly, yet while this essay follows Carey (1975) in presenting this in terms of a ritual view of communication (emphasizing community) Ms readers themselves typically follow a different definition. Their argument against mass media images is conceived in terms of a model of communication which asserts the possibility of "effects," of power and of control. In any case, this analysis suggests the advantage of adding to the ritual model the notion that cultural expression is not simply positive but also negative. It takes place in a larger, but not wholly determining, social order which tries very hard to achieve consensus on its own terms. So cultural expression is not only a process by which we symbolically construct meaningful identities and worlds, but also an expression of who we are not and a repudiation of worlds in which we do not want to live. Again, for a subculture, communication is expressive and constructive, but it is also necessarily responsive.

More centrally for the purposes of this article, the decoding and recoding which constitutes the No Comment department is another demonstration of the fruitfulness of Hall's coding constructs, and particularly his notion of oppositional code. On the other hand, certain problems remain. First, Thomas Streeter (1984) notes that Hall fails to distinguish his two uses of the term "oppositional code." In one sense, oppositional decoding represents a coherent

but alternative interpretation from within an opposed framework, where every dominant meaning is supplanted, on a one-for-one basis, by an oppositional one. In another sense, Hall's notion denies the validity of a one-for-one substitution, in order to foreground what that decoding otherwise leaves in the background. This essay obviously relies on the first sense. As noted above, it does not attempt to decode oppositionally the content of Ms itself, although that might be worthwhile. Streeter adds that the relationship between conscious and non-conscious levels are not sufficiently problemmatized; as a result, the conscious is oversimplified. This essay, following this tradition, concedes that further study may "get at" unconscious meanings; on the other hand, there is still much work to be done on what subjects say about and do with the communications they "handle" in everyday life.

Justin Wren-Lewis (1983) mounts a more serious attack on Morley's application of the Parkin-Hall model for audience/decoding research. Again, my study does not deal with these problems (many of which were raised by Morley himself in his 1981 "Critical Postscript"), although it attempts to sidestep them. For example, Wren-Lewis correctly emphasizes television (presumably by extension, other media) as a signfiying practice which produces meaning, rather than as a secondary sign-fixing practice which only reproduces meanings. This is crucial--although this paper does not discover whether feminist readers believe this. But precisely what makes the No Comment pages interesting is that difficulty of distinguishing encoding and decoding. Analytically the language is messy, but in fact, readers are not only decoding, but also recoding and re-decoding in the context of their own medium.

Secondly, Morley is accused of imposing, of "preferring" his own categories of decoding positions, both in terms of the content of the codes and the socio-economic class structure of the audience. Wren-Lewis also calls on researchers to interiew decoders individually so as to understand inter-subject differences. Again, this paper by no means resolves these thorny problems for what remains a critical project: understanding decoding. By neither interviewing individuals nor groups, but simply examining a fairly "silent" practice, I can say nothing about the range of re-decodings, nor the specific reasons for these differences. (Again, my "list" of themes found in No Comment, given that this list does not derive from audience members themselves, is meant to be suggestive, not analytic.) On the other hand, at least one can see the oppositional decoding practice that so much research fails to take seriously.

The present application of oppositional code suggests several related questions yet to be addressed, the first concerning the distinction and connection of the oppositional and negotiated codes. The differences must be fully elaborated, not only so that scholars may learn to recognize which is which, but also how to chart the passage from one mode to the other. Hall himself suggests, "One of the most significant political moments. . . is the point when events which are normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading" (1980b, p. 138). It may also be that groups move in the reverse direction, although this is unlikely. In either case, the question remains: what precipitates code changes? Examination of the texts of various groups, penetrated fully and then compared across time and space, may also bear on the issue of when in its life history, a

social group opts for one code or another. Such comparison may reveal whether the actual formulations of oppositional codes are consistent across groups, whether such formulations reconstitute parallel images and whether these serve similar purposes. Finally, especially in view of the decoded messages' re-publication, we must consider the relationship between oppositional encoding and oppositional decoding in order to understand the alternative preferred readings that can be taken from oppositional media.

Indeed, this essay returns to a call for studying media of specific cultural groups. Granted, scholars believe they are discussing more "important" media when analyzing U.S. News and World Report (circulation: 2,112,000), as opposed to Ms (circulation: 490,000). For that matter, television commands the greatest numbers of all. But ethnographic studies of the audiences of those more specialized publications may bear witness to cultural communities (not geographically-bound communities but rather communities of sentiment) which practice communication in a very different way than the audiences for more massified mass media. Specifically, these may reveal surprising degrees of resistance to and active repudiation of apparently hegemonic ideology, in the way Radway suggested above. Indeed, if it is true that the educational apparatus, reinforced by mainstream mass media, generally ignores alternative meaning systems in favor of the hegemonic ones, then looking at these alternative publications may suggest ways in which oppositional thinking may be taught and learned.

ENDNOTES

1. For example, this may be seen in the work of symbolic interactionists like Mead, Blumer, and Becker in the United States, and Williams and Hoggart in England. A very elegant articulation of this approach is found in Kreiling, Albert (1978).

2. Within the hegemonic code there is also a "professional" sub-code, characterized by an on-going attempt at neutrality and objectivity, but ultimately supporting the dominant code.

3. This implication that "anyone" can understand the problemmatic quality of the items is what allows me now to claim to be able to understand the creative responses of the Ms audience without making any claim to "superior" insights.

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