

Applying Semiotic Analysis to Social Data in Media Studies

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Introduction

Semiotics is one of the newest social science modes of analysis and generates one of the most interdisciplinary frameworks of applied research. Semiotic analysis is used in media and cultural studies, communications, linguistics, literary and film studies, psychology, history, sociology, art theory and architecture. The principle object of investigation in semiotic analysis in media and communication studies has been the 'text': – for example, newspapers, films, television shows, websites. The techniques for applying semiotic analysis to texts are well-established and relatively familiar. This paper is concerned with a further question – whether it is possible to apply a semiotic analysis to social data in media and communication studies, and how it can be done. It is argued that the semiotic analysis of social data in media studies requires not only a working knowledge of the field of semiotics, but a relevant postmodern definition of the term 'discourse', so that a link can be recognised between the micro-level of social action, and the macro-level of society, culture, the economy and political ideology. It is necessary to set the theoretical stage so that the discussion can proceed.

A. Early Semiotics

All human communication is made up of signs, working together to make meaning through the process of *semiosis*. Semiotics is the study of *signs* and *signifying practices*, bringing together the work of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and language pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce. It is argued that there is no inherent or necessary relationship between that which carries the meaning (the *signifier*) and the actual meaning which is carried (the *signified*). Peirce's semiotic paradigm (1934) distinguished between three kinds of signs: *icon*, *index* and *symbol*. An *icon* is a meaning which is based upon similar-

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ity or appearance (for example, similarity in shape, colour, sound etc). An *index* is a meaning generated through a cause and effect relationship (for example, a weathervane generates meaning from wind direction). A *symbol* carries meaning in a purely arbitrary way - the way natural language carries meaning. For example, almost the word same symbol/word - 'mobil(e)' - means a car in Indonesian and a cellular phone in English.

Saussure (1959) made a famous distinction between *langue* (language) and *parole* (speech). *Langue* refers to the system of rules and conventions which is independent of, and pre-exists, individual users; *parole* refers to its use in particular instances. Saussure focused on *langue* rather than *parole*. To Saussure what mattered most were the underlying structures and rules of a semiotic system rather than specific performances or practices of their use. Saussure's approach was to study the system 'synchronically' as if it were frozen in time (like a photograph) - rather than 'diachronically' - in terms of its evolution over time (like a film). Structuralist cultural theorists subsequently adopted this Saussurean priority, focusing on the representation and function of social and cultural phenomena within semiotic systems.

B. Later Developments

Contemporary Saussurian semioticians still divide the *sign* up between the *signifier* and the *signified*, maintaining that there is an essentially *arbitrary* relationship between the two. An important concept in semiotics is that one sign or set of signs can take the place of some other sign or set of signs in a theoretically infinite process. If '*infinite semiosis*' did not take place, then the media would run out of signs with which to carry meaning, and that would be the end of media as a form of communication. The process by which one sign is linked to another through the deferral of meaning is often represented as a semiotic chain, or chain of semiosis.

For the representation of women in texts this might be:

girl ⇒ virgin ⇒ bride ⇒ mother ⇒ woman ⇒ female ⇒ whore ⇒ prostitute ⇒ witch ⇒ and so on ...

Used in current media and communications research, semiotics is a type of social description and analysis which places specific emphasis upon understanding and exploration of the patterns of signs and symbols in texts, what they mean and how they are used. Textual semiotics examines familiar and everyday settings and the particular patterns, relationships, ideas and beliefs that characterise the ways that social and cultural meanings are habitually made from texts. The most common aim is to grasp the symbolism of everyday media texts in popular culture - how people might read and understand symbols and signs, and thereby make meanings from words, sounds, pictures and body language in texts. Some refer to this as 'deconstruction' - a term coined by Jacques Derrida. Derrida was also the author of the idea

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that meanings are referred on endlessly through chains of signifiers in the process of *différance* – the infinite deferral of fixed meaning (Derrida 1981).

Major Theorists

Leading modern semiotic theorists include Roland Barthes, Algirdas Greimas, Umberto Eco and Julia Kristeva. Semiotics began to become a major cultural studies approach in the 1960s, after the translated essays of Roland Barthes were published in English as *Mythologies* (1957).

A. Roland Barthes

Barthes stated that: semiology aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all of these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not *languages*, at least systems of signification (Barthes 1967: 9).

The distinction between denotation and connotation is an important basis for Barthes' semiotic theory. He claims that when we read signs and sign systems, we can distinguish between different kinds of messages. *Denotation* is the "literal or obvious meaning" or the "first-order signifying system". *Connotation* refers to "second-order signifying systems", additional cultural meanings we make from a given sign, where the context often alters the meaning. In other words, the same signifier can point to a number of different signified meanings depending on the situation or setting.

In his book *S/Z*, Barthes further developed further his ideas of denotation and connotation. He argued that denotation is associated with closure and singularity of meaning. In contrast, connotation represents the principle of opening up the text to all kinds of interpreted meanings and readings. From this, Barthes developed his idea that there are two types of semiotic systems: *closed* and *open* semiotic systems. This allows us to distinguish between closed and open texts in media analysis. An example of a closed text is the Ramayana Ballet, for example. It always has to be performed the same way, and the traditional audience already has all the meanings. The overall meaning outcome of the text is always predictable and more or less the same. An example of an open text is a live comedy show where there is no fixed format, and the audience cannot predict what is going to happen. There is no "correct" way of interpreting the meaning of open texts; on the contrary, they are available for all kinds of readings. Some people will make a negative meaning from the comedy, for example. Others will make a positive meaning. Some people may not find the comedy funny at all. Closed and open texts serve different cultural purposes and both are valuable.

B. Jean Baudrillard

In the early 1970s, French theorist Baudrillard argued that in late modernity the symbolic dimension of material commodities had become much more important for the circulation of commodities in society. For Baudrillard, sign value is the result of the development of the fetish character of the commodity. Sign value is that value that gives status when it is consumed or spent. Sign value, then, is involved in the production of difference; for example, social status difference, or the dominance of political elites (Baudrillard 1998).

Baudrillard (1983;1987) coined the term *simulacra*, implying that what we consume from the media (especially audiovisual material) becomes just as real, if not more real, than what it apparently refers to. Separating the representation (the simulacra) from the real is not always easy in the age of mass media. For example, some dedicated television viewers are more in touch with celebrities and *sinetron* than with the people around them. Baudrillard maintains that the hyperrealist carnival of the media is at the centre of contemporary culture worldwide. Only the unreal seems real, and this gives rise to conditions of 'hyperreality' where everything is representation.

Baudrillard maintained that late twentieth century culture was characterised by the phenomenon of 'hyperreality':

By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials ... it is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine (Baudrillard 1983: 2).

Baudrillard's hyperrealist world is ultimately devoid of things. Only representations surround us. In hyperrealist worlds the point is that we become increasingly distant from an originary materiality as objects disappear in the play of simulacra. In such a world material objects and human subjects disappear, leaving only signs without meaning.

C. Stuart Hall

The adoption of semiotics in Britain was influenced by its prominence in the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham while the centre was under the direction of the neo-Marxist sociologist Stuart Hall.

According to Hall, all images and texts are both *encoded* and *decoded*. They are encoded in the production process and in their placement within a certain cultural setting. They are decoded by the viewers/readers/consum-

ers. Hall (1980) maintains there are three positions the viewers can adopt as decoders:

1. A dominant-hegemonic reading: - viewers/readers/consumers identify with, and receive the dominant message of an image or text (such as a television show) in an unquestioning manner.
2. A negotiated reading: - viewers/readers/consumers negotiate an interpretation from the text and its meanings which may not be that of the producers.
3. An oppositional reading: - viewers/readers/consumers take an oppositional position, either by completely disagreeing with the ideological position embodied in a text or rejecting it altogether - for example by ignoring it.

Another of Hall's principal concerns is with representation. Hall sees representation as an act of reconstruction rather than reflection (1986). For example, the image of the woman on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* magazine doesn't reflect what that woman really looks like. The image reconstructs something; but it isn't simply a woman. The surface meaning is an attractive woman, but the image was constructed to sell a specific kind of life-style that in turn demands the detailed use of commercial products and other commodities. Behind the image lies an entire world of beliefs, ideas, values, behaviors, and relationships that must be decoded and laid at the doorstep of transnational corporations, advertisers, cultural entrepreneurs and myth-makers. Representation is an act of ideological (re)construction that serves the specific interests of those who control the media, and their driving interest is always profit or power.

Semiotics and Discourse Analysis

Hall maintained that his concept of representation should be productively used to critique sign-systems within cultural and social texts. The idea of discourse, however, is generally used to critique larger swaths of culture. Although the term discourse originally referred to dialogue or conversation, it now has a much wider *poststructuralist* and *postmodern* meaning, connected with the operation of power as knowledge.

A. Foucault: Discourse – Knowledge - Power

For Foucault *discourses* are: "Practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak (...) discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own intervention" (Foucault 1977: 49).

Discourse is a concept that explores relationships between social power and socially produced knowledges, and how these knowledges as power bring human subjects into certain relations with each other. It refers

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to the socially constructed hierarchies of meanings, valuations and understandings which circulate in a given socio-historical context and inform both social practices and experiences of the self:

Discourses in Foucault's work are ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and the relations between them (Weedon 1987:108).

B. Hall: Discourse as Representation

A discourse for Stuart Hall "is a group of statements which provide a language for talking about - i.e. a way of representing - a particular kind of knowledge about a topic" (1996: 201). Discourses are produced through language and practices. They are ways of talking about and acting towards an idea or group of people. One of Hall's most powerful insights concerning discourses is that "anyone deploying a discourse must position themselves as if they were the *subject* of the discourse" (1996: 202, emphasis in original).

The example that Hall gives us is the discourse of the West. Ever since the distinction between the East and the West was made, the West has been seen as more advanced, more modern, and so on. This is in fact one of the reasons the distinction was made - to talk about the West as superior. In this discourse the West is the model toward which the developing world must strive. This discourse also places an obligation upon the West to assist the developing world in the move up the global ladder. The power of discourse means that in order to talk about the relationship between the West and other nations you must adopt the terms of the discourse. For example, any time we use the terms "third world nation," "modernization," or "globalization," we are positioning ourselves within core-periphery discourse and implying western superiority. For us to be able to talk about world relations without invoking belief in western supremacy, we would have to come up with alternative discourse for talking about the world.

C. Discourse and Semiotics

It is clear that the postmodern concept of discourse allows us to focus on the way knowledge, language, and culture is used, rather than any idea of ultimate truth or falseness. That being the case, "the very language we use to describe the so-called facts" constructs "what is true and what is false" (Hall 1996, p. 203). Knowledge and power are always intertwined. Knowledge, including from media sources, is produced through discursive practice - 'in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised, and redistributed' (Foucault 1982: 216) in order to produce certain knowledges that regulate the conduct of citizens.

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Knowledge and culture simultaneously state the condition of the world and reproduce political beliefs and values. The concept of discourse is essential for locating any task of semiotic analysis within its socio-cultural and historical context. Without the concept of discourse, social semiotics has no real meaning.

Contemporary Semiotics

Returning to the history of the development of semiotics, Volosinov (1973: 21) reversed the Saussurean priority of *langue* over *parole*: 'The sign is part of organized social intercourse and cannot exist, as such, outside it, reverting to a mere physical artifact'. The meaning of a sign is nowadays understood not simply in its relationship to other signs within the system of signifiers like the semiotic chain above, but rather in the social context of its use.

A. The Mediation of Social Change

Semiotics is now a field of study involving many different theoretical stances and methodological tools. Semiotics involves the study not only of 'signs' in everyday speech, but of anything which 'stands for' something else. In a semiotic sense, signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects. Contemporary semioticians study signs not in isolation but as part of semiotic 'sign systems' (such as a medium or genre), and are thereby concerned not only with communication but also with the construction and maintenance of reality. In analysing media we need to acknowledge the real-world transformations involved in processes of mediation. When we use a medium or form of media for any purpose, its use becomes part of that purpose. In using any medium, to some extent we serve its 'purposes' as well as it serving ours. When we engage with media we both act and are acted upon, use and are used. So it is possible for new meanings to be generated, especially through social interaction with others, which is a process of mediation in itself.

B. The Semiosphere

Thinking in 'ecological' terms about the interaction of different semiotic structures and sign systems led the Russian cultural semiotician Yuri Lotman (1990: 124-125) to coin the term 'semiosphere' to refer to 'the whole semiotic space of the culture in question'. Later John Hartley (1996: 106) commented that 'there is more than one level at which one might identify a semiosphere - at the level of a single national or linguistic culture, for instance, or of a larger unity such as "the West", right up to "the species"'. The concept of a semiosphere, which is really a formation of discourses, or a discursive formation, offers a more unified and dynamic

vision of semiosis than the study of a text or mediated human practice as if it existed in a social and cultural vacuum.

C. Social Semiotics

Most contemporary semioticians give priority to the historicity and social context of signs and systems of signification, which are not fixed but are constantly changing over time. Seeking to establish a wholeheartedly 'social' semiotics, Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress (1988: 1) declare that 'the social dimensions of semiotic systems are so intrinsic to their nature and function that the systems cannot be studied in isolation'. While formerly the emphasis was on studying sign systems - language, literature, cinema, architecture, music, and so on - conceived of as mechanisms that generate messages, what is now being examined is the work performed through them. It is this work or activity which constitutes and/or transforms the codes, at the same time as it constitutes and transforms the individuals using the codes, performing the work; the audience or consumers who are, therefore, the *subjects of semiosis*.

This is a semiotics concerned with stressing the social aspect of signification, its practical, aesthetic, or ideological use in interpersonal communication where meaning is construed as semantic value produced through culturally shared codes. Semiotics is important because it teaches us that reality itself is a system of signs. Studying semiotics can assist us to become more aware of social reality as a construction and of the roles played by ourselves and others in constructing it. Meaning is not 'transmitted' to us - we actively create it according to a complex interplay of codes or conventions of which we are normally unaware. Through the study of semiotics we become aware that these signs and codes are normally transparent and disguise our task in 'reading' them. In defining realities, signs serve ideological functions. Deconstructing and contesting the realities of signs can reveal *whose* realities are privileged and whose are suppressed.

D. A New Paradigm

In 1997 Fairclough and Wodak distinguished three broad domains of social life in which media discourse significantly constitutes society and culture: representations of the world, social relations between people, and people's social and personal identities. By 2004 it was argued in the influential journal *Social Semiotics* that we need to move beyond the obsession with analysing static texts to a new active paradigm of semiotics for researching media-related social phenomena:

The proposed new paradigm is disarmingly simple: it treats media as the open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media (...) The new paradigm decentres the media text for a reason: to sidestep the

insoluble problems over how to prove “media effects” (...) hidden assumptions about “media effects” abound in media analysis and everyday talk about media. Indeed, they are hard to avoid if you start from the text itself (...) Why else study the detailed structure of a media text as your primary research focus unless you can plausibly claim that those details make a difference to wider social processes? But it is exactly this that is difficult to show (Couldry 2004: 117).

Couldry says the question we ought to be asking is: ‘what, quite simply, are people doing in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts?’ (2004: 119). This leads me to the analytical section of this paper. How can we apply a critical semiotic analysis to FGD data where the discussion is about the effects of media?

Applying Semiotic Analysis to Social Data

A. The Data

Excerpt from Mixed Focus Group Discussion about the Effects of Mass Media on Young People (Central Mosque, Makassar, January 2002)

1. **Dewi (19):** Maybe ...mungkin kayak, pengertian modernisasi itu di sini yang disalahpahami oleh remaja ya, mungkin banyak remaja yang memikir bahwa modernisasi itu yang misalnya cara gaulnya kayak yang ada di TV, kayak cara hidup yang begitu yang dikatakan modern. Namun yang saya tahu kan modernnya kita, modernisasi adalah disiplin, on time, saling hormat menghormati yang kayak gitu namun yang dilihat remaja misalnya mungkin karena pengaruh informasi yang diterima sehingga pengertian modern mereka itu seperti itu.

Maybe...like .., the meaning of modernisation has been misunderstood by teenagers you know. Maybe most think that modernization is, for example, the free way of mixing like what we see on TV, that's what they think a modern way of life is. But that's not our way of being modern. Modernisation [for us] is discipline, being punctual, respecting others, these sorts of things. But like, for teenagers, maybe because they are influenced by the information they get [from media], that forms their understanding of modernization.

2. **Alharizin (20):** Saya kira mass media atau media masa itu sangat besar pengaruhnya terhadap perilaku generasi muda khususnya itu sebenarnya media itu sangat banyak manfaatnya, cuma disisi lain dia juga punya dampak negatif terutama pada tingkah laku generasi muda ya contohnya ketika mereka melihat tingkah laku yang mereka anggap modern itu terkadang mencontoh dalam hal perilaku. Celananya dirobek-robek, atau rambut gondrong. Itu mungkin karena orang barat itu mereka punya rambut merah jadi

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mereka juga jadi merah gitu. Kulit kan hitam. Jadi saya kira itu tetap ada negatif efek dan positif efek. Jadi seharusnya kita yang berpendidikan, kita harus memfilter yang mana yang baik dan kita tinggalkan yang negatifnya, begitu.

I think mass media has major effects on the behaviour of the young generation despite the fact that there are also advantages. On the other side there are definitely some negative effects that impact on the young generation. For example when they see some behaviours that they think are modern they imitate those behaviours. They tear their pants, or grow their hair long. And probably because westerners have blonde hair they dye their hair blonde, even though their skin is dark. So I think there are always both negative and positive effects. Those of us who are educated have to filter the good parts and leave the negative ones behind.

3. **Bachtiar (19):** Saya kira seandainya saya pemerintah, itu saya harus betul-betul memberi bimbingan dan penyuluhan melalui televisi. Kalau ada warga saya, karena saya pemerintah, supaya sadar. Karena saya lihat sebagian besar ya, most of the Indonesian people have television. Sehingga otomatis itu pemerintah yang memiliki stasiun-stasiun itu bisa menyiarkan hal-hal yang baik kepada masyarakatnya. Terutama bimbingan-bimbingan mengenai perilaku orang yang tidak baik mereka punya ahlak. Jadi siaran TV sekarang terutama sinetron yang dibidang bagus, itu sebenarnya banyak yang tidak layak untuk disiarkan. Jadi sebagai pemerintah yang bijak seandainya itu harus memfilter sinetron-sinetron yang ada. Ini yang layak untuk masyarakat, ini yang tidak. Jadi yang tidak layak itu jangan disiarkan.

I think if I were the government I would give guidance and supervision through television. I would make sure the people of my nation developed a good awareness. Because I know that most Indonesian people have television. If the government owned all the stations they could broadcast material to the people, especially guidance for good behaviour and morals. You know, the high rating programs on TV nowadays, especially sinetron, have some scenes which should not be allowed to be broadcast. So a wise government would censor sinetron on TV. They would decide which scenes are good for society. Scenes that are not good for society should not be broadcast.

4. **Rosdiana (20):** Menurut saya mungkin saya tidak sependapat dengan saudara Bachtiar. Mas media televisi itu memiliki dampak positif dan negatif. Saya kira tergantung dari individu-individu masing-masing ya. Kita bisa menarik manfaat dari sinetron. Mungkin karena kita lihat sekarang ya, sinetron di Indonesia ini sering menampilkan gaya-gaya hidup yang serba mewah. Saya kira ini juga bisa menjadi motivasi bagi kita. Terkadang ya, kita sebagai

remaja, kita sering berangan-angan bagaimana kita bisa seperti mereka, memang individualnya mengambil positif efek dari film tersebut maka dia otomatis menambah motivasinya untuk belajar supaya bisa menjadi orang sukses juga. Tapi kalau dia hanya berangan-angan tanpa ada usaha, inilah dampak negatif dari film-film tsb. Dan saya yakin bahwa segala situasi punya dampak positif dan punya dampak negatif. Apapun itu.

I think I don't agree with Bachtiar's ideas. As mass media, TV has both positive and negative effects. I think it depends on each and every individual. We can learn something from a TV sinetron. Maybe because TV sinetron nowadays mostly feature a glamorous and wealthy life style. I think this can motivate us. Sometimes, as teenagers, we have a fantasy about becoming like those people. So as individuals we can get a positive effect from sinetron like that. Obviously it can increase our motivation to study hard so that we can become successful people like that. But if it only remains a fantasy, without any effort on our part, then there can be a negative effect from shows of any kind.

B. A Simple Semiotic Analysis

Let's move from a simple to a complex critical analysis of this transcript. Firstly, if we stretch the semiotic metaphor and consider the whole excerpt above as a single *sign*, the *signified* here is the topic of the effect of mass media on Indonesian teenagers. Each person's response to the FGD topic is then a different *signifier* which points to that topic. Obviously such a simple analysis does not tell us much. We need to consider the detail in each person's account. Once we do this though, we will become aware of the internal semiosis of the FGD excerpt. As each person speaks in turn, they frame their account against what the previous person said. The chain of signifiers (themes) would then look like this:

Dewi: free social mixing
 ↓
 Alharizin: behave like westerners
 ↓
 Bachtiar: government must censor media
 ↓
 Rosdiana: but *sinetron* can motivate us

This allows us to see that the semiosis of meaning in the FGD discussion moving from Dewi's comments to Bachtiar's comments is logically heading for 'closure' (Barthes 1967), until Rosdiana's contradictory comment about the positive effects of *sinetron* 'opens up' the play of possible meanings again. This is a very common pattern in human conversations.

C. Applying the Concepts of Encoding and Decoding

We may extend the analysis so far using Hall's paradigm of semiotics. If we recall, Hall claims all images and texts are both *encoded* and *decoded*. Using this idea, we may note that Dewi firstly claims Indonesian teenagers wrongly *decode* the message about modernity in the mass media. Alharizin takes this further claiming that teenagers not only *decode* the images and texts of the mass media in the wrong way, but mirror this error of interpretation in their behaviour. He also implies that western influences *encode* Indonesian mass media, so in this sense the offensive *decoding* of mass media messages by teenagers is understandable. Bachtiar takes this logic even further, arguing that the Indonesian government needs to take full censorship control of the *encoding* process for the mass media, so that no negative *decoding* by teenagers can possibly take place. Finally, Rosdiana argues against the determinist idea that teenagers always decode mass media wrongly, claiming that it is possible to decode even *sinetron* in a beneficial way.

We may recall that Hall maintains there are three positions for decoding mass media: 1) a dominant-hegemonic reading; 2) a negotiated reading, and 3) an oppositional reading. It is easy to see that Rosdiana is arguing for a *negotiated* reading of mass media on the part of teenagers, and thereby implying she herself habitually makes a negotiated reading of mass media. The other three FGD participants all indicate by their comments that they themselves typically make an *oppositional* reading of mass media, because they disagree with the ideological position embodied in the text. However, they argue that Indonesian teenagers make a *dominant-hegemonic* reading of mass media. That is, *anak remaja* identify with, and receive, the dominant images of television in an unquestioning manner.

D. Discourse Analysis

We now need to build up to the wider, more complex level of discourse analysis to address the following important questions – Who are these young people in the FGD? Why are they talking like this about the mass media? What kinds of knowledge are they reflecting and constructing in their talk about Indonesian teenagers and mass media? As stated above, *discourse* is a concept that explores relationships between social power and socially produced knowledges, and how these knowledges as power bring human subjects into certain relations with each other. It refers to the socially constructed hierarchies of meanings, valuations and understandings which circulate in a given socio-historical context and inform both social practices and experiences of the self.

So first off, the four young people in the focus group are both expressing and reflecting some readily identifiable discourses in their dialogue about the effect of the mass media on Indonesian teenagers. The four young people were interviewed in a discussion room at the Central Mosque com-

plex in Makassar. They were all devout Muslim youth. So they share the Islamist discourse of condemning secular (westernised) Indonesian popular culture. They also articulate an apparently shared discourse of concern about the moral danger to Indonesian teenagers posed by the mass media. This is not just a Muslim discourse, but one expressed by the government, politicians and journalists, and the religious leaders of other faiths in Indonesia. Certainly the first three speakers talk in a very similar way about the mass media and teenagers, indicating shared discursive subject positions on the effect of mass media as negative.

The relationship between social power and socially produced knowledges in the enactment of discourse in dialogue is best illustrated by Bachtiar's implication that the government should take full censorship control of the Indonesian mass media – a very forceful operation of authoritarian power. The seizing of full mass media control in a country usually only happens in conditions of revolution and *coup d'etat*, not in a constitutional democracy. But we may note that Bachtiar imagines his control over the mass media will be benevolent and protective – what Foucault calls 'pastoral power' – in accord with Bachtiar's ideal vision (expressed elsewhere in the FGD) of Indonesia under full *shari'a* law – an Islamic state. It is this knowledge/power nexus that informs his expression of discourse on the negative effect of the mass media and protection of the young. At the level of society, a discourse can be described as a "group of statements which provide a language for talking about - i.e. a way of representing - a particular kind of knowledge about a topic" (Hall 1996: 201). At a mundane level discourse manifests as ways of talking about and acting towards an idea or group of people. In the comments of the first three FGD participants, the shared discourse about mass media is that it is dangerous and needs to be controlled. While the shared discourse about teenagers is that they are naïve, passive and impressionable and so need to be protected from the mass media.

Seen this way, Rosdiana's comments really do reference quite a different (reverse) discourse, even though she shares the same approximate discursive subject position as her three friends. She is implying that Indonesian teenagers can benefit from some consumerist, hedonistic mass media messages to motivate themselves towards upward social and economic mobility. Her discourse about the mass media then, is that even shallow *sinetron* can serve a hidden useful social purpose as a valuable cultural resource for the positive construction of identity. Her discourse about teenagers implies that they are impressionable, but this can be positive because they can use their imagination productively to construct ideas about a better life. The FGD transcript above then, demonstrates the historicity and social context of signs, systems of signification and discourses that inform the meaning-making process of semiosis are not fixed but constantly changing over time.

Conclusion

This paper has traced some key trends in semiotic analysis relevant to studies of media and communication. Increasingly in media studies we seek to know not only the effects of media on audiences, but we seek to investigate what people themselves think about contemporary media and possible effects. Accordingly this paper has sought to demonstrate the application of an expanded semiotic analysis to social data in media studies. The analysis above does not represent a full analysis of the FGD transcript excerpt provided, as this could obviously be taken much further. It does indicate though that ‘the social dimensions of semiotic systems are so intrinsic to their nature and function that the systems cannot be studied in isolation’ (Hodge and Kress 1988: 1). We can learn a great deal about the ‘effects’ of media by asking people about media effects, and treating their responses in the same critical way that we have previously treated media texts. In short, semiotic analysis of social data relevant to media studies can reveal how knowledge as power brings human subjects into certain relations with each other through engagement with the media. Through analysing how discourses operate in talk about media, we can better understand the socially constructed hierarchies of meanings, valuations and comprehensions that circulate in the early twenty-first century, and inform both social practices and experiences of the self in relation to media.

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