MEDIA & SOCIETY
DEFINING MEANING

Communication is central to human experience. When we are born we are immediately situated in, and gradually socialized into, language and meaning. The language we learn to speak, the culture that informs our view of the world and the ideas we are taught precede our arrival in the world. As we grow up we embody history: clusters or pools of ideas, meanings and practices that have congealed over time. We identify these ideas and practices as societies and cultures.
Communication has an array of affective and material roles to play in how we relate to others, how we imagine our lives and how we get things done in the world. In his history of the idea of communication Durham-Peters (1999: 1) writes, ‘Though humans were ancienly dubbed the “speaking animal” by Aristotle, only since the late nineteenth century have we defined ourselves in terms of our ability to communicate with one another.’ In this book, we are particularly interested in how communication has become central to the development of society, culture and politics since the early twentieth century. In western societies, like the United Kingdom, Ireland, United States, Canada and Australia, communication has become bound up with the production and circulation systems we call ‘the media’. Before we get to the media though we must first consider meaning as an elementary building block of communication. And we must examine the role of communication in forming and maintaining social relationships.

By internalizing meanings, practices and ways of communicating we become members of various social groups and cultures. Meanings are resources that we use to generate our identities, negotiate with others and position ourselves within a social milieu. Meanings are never stable, static or fixed. As we use, circulate and share them, we also remake and reposition them. Our societies and cultures then are also not static. They are continually being reinvented and struggled over. Every individual makes some contribution to reshaping meaning as we engage in the everyday process of communicating with each other. As we grapple to make sense of, and shape, our world, we necessarily change the meaning structures and cultural practices we are born into. The meanings and practices that shape us, and that we use to shape our relationships with others and our world, shift throughout our lives. Numerous, often imperceptibly small, shifts result in the networks of meanings changing from generation to generation, place to place and group to group. Culture is a dynamic and living process. Meanings change and grow precisely because the process of communication – perceiving, receiving and decoding; imparting, disseminating and encoding – relies on innumerable small creative transactions between active human beings.

All individuals play a role in making, remaking and circulating meaning. Some individuals and groups, however, have more power than others within the communicative process. The networks of meaning making we live within are not arbitrary or random. People are positioned differently by the power relationships in which they are embedded. These positions impact on the access individuals have to media production and circulation systems. Some individuals have more symbolic, cultural and economic resources to control the production and circulation of meaning. This is by no means to suggest though that communication is a linear hierarchy. Each person who communicates is located in a network of social relationships at a particular place and time. They each have differing capacities to adopt, negotiate or resist the production and circulation of meanings that constitute their lives, identities and social worlds.

The making of meaning is embedded within human relationships. Human relationships are marked by an uneven allocation of symbolic and material resources. Those resources are the basis upon which some individuals are able to exert control over the shape of human societies, cultural practices and the shaping of the material world. In this book we refer to these processes as power relationships. One way individuals gain and maintain power is by using meaning to position themselves relative
to others. To do this they create and control systems of meaning production and circulation. Just as meanings are never fixed, so too are power relationships always in a state of flux. Meaning is struggled over as people work at improving their position within networks of power relationships. Gaining access to the means of communication, and even particular meanings, is both derivative of power and a means of acquiring power. Those with power have a greater capacity to make and circulate meaning because they are able to control communication institutions and practices. Sites where meanings are made, and the channels through which meanings flow, are significant sites of struggle. Meaning-production spaces like newsrooms, film and television studios, parliaments, courts, universities and research institutions are sites of struggle where people compete for access and argue over ideas.

To understand why a particular set of meanings circulates at a certain time and place we must examine the power relationships between people. Mapping power and meaning is complex because each is constantly shifting in relation to the other. There is a continual struggle over power in all human groups and a constant realignment of winners and losers. Shifts in power are accompanied by changes in the production of meaning. Mapping the mechanics of meaning production, as with mapping meaning itself, requires careful consideration of the time, place and power relationships in which meanings are embedded.

THE POWER TO INFLUENCE MEANING MAKING

At the outset then we need to examine the relationship between power and meaning. Power does not have the tangibility of an object, yet as human beings we all intuitively recognize its presence. We implicitly know in our day-to-day lives how to act according to the power relationships that surround us. In our homes, classrooms, workplaces, and in public spaces we know that some people are able to exert control over how we act. That control is often subtle, and we willingly consent to power via our actions. Like communication, power is omnipresent, yet it can be overlooked because it seems to be just there. Power is though a crucial dimension of the production and circulation of meaning. When we examine power we pay attention to how ideas are made and circulated, by certain people, in particular settings and moments in time. Power is a slippery phenomenon with numerous definitions. For the purposes of this book, power will be seen as the capacity to get what you want when interacting with others. Max Weber (1978) expressed this best when saying that those with power are able to realize their own will even against the resistance of others. Power is also found in the more subtle capacity to stop conflicts from emerging by preventing oppositional agendas from even developing in the first place (Lukes 1974).

Proposing this definition of power raises three related issues.

• Firstly, what is the relationship between power and social elites?
• Secondly, where does power come from?
• And, thirdly, what is the relationship between being embedded within a power relationship and free agency?
What is the relation between power and social elites?

Discussions about the relationships between meaning making and the media can easily end up sounding like a conspiracy theory in which power elites are seen to manipulate media content to serve their own interests. Studies of media ownership and control, sometimes drawing on the political economy approach to communication, have posited conspiratorial interpretations of media control. These conspiracies more or less argue that powerful groups carefully control the messages and meanings made and circulated in the media. They see an all-powerful media being used to generate ‘false consciousness’. While powerful groups might use media to create and circulate their preferred meanings, they can’t guarantee that the meanings they make will do what they intend. The process of making and managing meaning is messy and opportunistic. There is no conspiracy of elites sitting in a closed room engineering social meanings. The control of meaning making is not always repressive; it can be reflexive and adaptable. That is, elites don’t control meaning making by policing specific meanings, but often by watching and responding to meaning making in general: by steering, shaping and channelling. The control of meaning making can be nuanced and subtle. Media production is used by powerful groups to maintain power. But this does not mean they can simply use the media to exert direct manipulative control over people.

The debate about the power elite theory between the American political scientist Robert Dahl (1961) and the American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) is useful when considering the power elite argument. In his book *Who Governs?* Dahl put forward a pluralist position that argued there is no unified elite because power is diffused within a democracy. Whereas Mills argued in *The Power Elite* that ultimately power resided with a small group of people within a society. Dahl’s pluralist model sees society as made up of multitudes of intersecting and cross-cutting interest groups without a clear elite. Mills’ power elite model sees society as hierarchically structured, with a small unified elite commanding the rest of society. In this book we engage with a third approach, the hegemonic domination model. Hegemony refers to the establishment of a culture – a certain set of ideas, practices and values – as common sense. Hegemonic ideas are ones that people consent to. In western societies, for instance, liberalism, democracy and capitalism are dominant hegemonic ideas. Most people appear to consent to these ideas and the actions people take as a consequence of them. Hegemonic elites are formed out of alliances of interest groups. These hegemonic alliances become powerful, but their dominance is messy and tentative. It is less hierarchical than in Mills’ conceptualization.

While at first Mills’ and Dahl’s positions may seem mutually exclusive, it is possible to see each as valid if power is seen to migrate and mutate. Sites of power constantly shift in the course of struggles taking place. Pluralist theory’s denial that elites can (and do) emerge seems naive. But neither is the existence of power elites a necessary condition of human existence – contexts can exist where power is diffused in the way described by pluralist theorists like Dahl (1961). Similarly, the pluralist failure to address the fact that elites can and do intentionally work to manipulate and control non-elites also seems naive. But the notion that non-elites are necessarily powerless and perpetually manipulated seems equally dubious. It is more helpful to recognize the existence of elites and aspirant elites, as
well as non-elite groups who are part of a complex pluralist competition for (material and cultural) resources and power. Within this framework the media are one of the many social sites struggled over as a means to acquire and build power.

The hegemonic dominance model is based on this mutable and shifting conceptualization of elites. At certain moments elites might well congeal and manage to become the dominant power brokers within a particular context; only to later have their power challenged and overthrown. This challenge might come from another emergent elite or it might come from a diffused and pluralist network or alliance of interests. One way to imagine Dahl’s model is as society having no centre of power, but rather being composed of a series of fragmented and competing interests; this constellation or balance of interests is susceptible to change. If society is conceptualized as a fluid and continually mutating entity it becomes possible to view elite theory and pluralist theory as describing different moments of a shifting continuum. Gramsci’s (1971) notion of hegemonic struggle is especially useful when conceptualizing the interaction between various competing interest groups. Hegemonic struggle is also helpful in conceptualizing existing, emergent and decaying power elites. Hegemonies have to be built and maintained. Becoming and remaining powerful is never completely accomplished, it requires continuous work: investing resources, managing relationships with other would-be elites, amassing material resources and creating and attaining consent for your ideas. Ruling elites are not conspiracies somehow manipulating society.

![Diagram of Dahl's pluralist model, Mills' power elite model, and Hegemonic dominance model]

**Figure 1.1** Pluralism, power elites and hegemonic dominance
behind the scenes: they are instead the outcome of continual hard hegemonic labour. In present day societies, creating and maintaining hegemonies involves managing the interests of millions of people.

**Where does power come from?**

There are three common explanations of the source of power.

- **Firstly,** access to material and cultural resources needed to get your way and attain the consent of others. This includes the use or threat of violence.
- **Secondly,** the occupation of social positions that enhance your capacity to get your way, have others comply with you and restrain the capacity of others to act.
- **And thirdly,** using and controlling language to structure social relations.

All three explanations are valuable. Power is derivative of access to economic and cultural resources, social positions and the ability to control language.

To acquire and maintain power, elites and would-be elites seek to control institutions that make and manage ideas. Various institutions are ‘licensed’ to manufacture and circulate meaning: education institutions, the media, parliaments and courts of law. These sites are cultural resources. Access to them is struggled over and controlled. In any given society, struggles around these sites can be observed. These struggles are most intense when power relations are fragile or contested. Powerful groups attempt to control and limit access by a variety of means.

A common means of control is via credentials. Credentials are criteria produced by institutions to govern access. For instance, to be a teacher in a school, or an academic in a university, or a lawyer admitted to the bar you must have acquired the appropriate qualifications. During the twentieth century universities became the key credentialing mechanism in western society. Not just anyone can gain access to a media institution and become a producer of meaning. Besides having the appropriate skills and qualifications, those who run media institutions also ensure the meaning makers they employ share the meanings of that institution. You will not remain employed at a mainstream western news organization if you produce stories that are anarchist, anti-capitalist, fascist or that encourage terrorism, for example.

The media became an important cultural resource during the twentieth century for positioning people: as good or bad, as powerful or weak, as important or unimportant, as credible or illegitimate. Media representations are necessarily battled over because such discourses serve to legitimate or de-legitimate particular hierarchies of social positions and the incumbents of those positions. Given the importance the media assumed in the process of making and circulating powerful ideas from the second half of the twentieth century, media institutions have become prized possessions for those seeking power. Owning or controlling a media institution empowers the owner to hire and fire the makers of meaning. Often, media empower particular people and ideas based simply on who and what they pay attention to. Media can disempower not only by saying a particular person or idea is bad, but by simply failing to acknowledge its existence. Whether the ownership and control of media sites does actually confer power will depend on the individuals concerned, the context they operate
within and the wider struggles taking place within that context. Power is, however, not immutable and the institutions that produce meaning are dynamic sites. One observation we can make though is that already having material and symbolic power is an advantage in future power struggles.

**What is the relationship between being embedded within a power relationship and free agency?**

This is a question about the relationship between being controlled and being free. Essentially, there are two different conceptions of power.

- In the first, people are passive and have power exercised over them. They merely inhabit preordained structures and social roles. In this view people are conceptualized as imprisoned within power relationships and structures, whether these are economic, political or cultural.
- The second sees humans as active and part of a process in which power is struggled over. Here, people have agency. Our lifeworlds are seen as the outcome of mutable and creative human activity in which we make and remake our own structures.

For our examination of communication, this poses a question of whether we are seen to be free to make meaning, or whether we merely inhabit predetermined sets of meanings.

The question of predetermined structure versus human agency needs to be positioned within the shift in western philosophy from structuralism to post-structuralism that developed in the mid-twentieth century. This is a complex shift, involving several of the key figures of twentieth-century thought and philosophy.

**Meaning is fixed**

For Ferdinand de Saussure (1974), a founding theorist of linguistics, we are socialized in a prison-house of language. We are born into a world of subjective structures and we learn their pre-existing signs and codes. The Marxist theorist Louis Althusser (1971) took Saussure’s notion of linguistic structures and used these to develop his idea of ideological state apparatuses. Ideological state apparatuses include family, religion, media and education. These structures position us within fixed ideologies or meanings. The way we understand the world and act is determined by those meanings. Within the Althusserian world-view, power derived from controlling these ideological state apparatuses. Human agency was given little scope within this structural and subjectivist view of human communication.

**Meaning can be temporarily fixed**

The shift into a post-structural interpretation of meaning came with the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1977, 1979). Foucault also saw humans as being constituted within linguistic structures. However, for Foucault, we are constituted within discursive practices, and these practices are created by human agency within institutions. This Foucaultian shift was highly significant because it opened a space for human agency and struggle that was tied to a notion of institutionalized communication.
Structures exist, but these structures, institutions and practices are mutable and changeable because they are the outcome of struggles between active human beings. Structures are something humans maintain through their discourses and practices. The Foucaultian notion of discursive practices represented a shift away from linguistic determinism, that is, away from the idea that we are born into a language or system of meanings and ideas that we cannot change. His notion of knowledge as being constituted by active human practices, within human-made institutions, placed Foucault’s understanding of communication within the same terrain as that of Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) notion of hegemonic struggle. For both Foucault and Gramsci, communication is the outcome of human practices that are struggled over. There may be communicative structures which set boundaries or parameters, but these do not predetermine human action.

Meaning is never fixed

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1976) took this Foucaultian notion one stage further, and explored the struggle over meaning as a process of trying to either fix meanings into place or uncouple meanings. For Derrida there is a constant shift in meaning structures as the process of fixing and uncoupling and re-fixing unfolds. The political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) took Derrida’s notion one stage further by even questioning the possibility of ever fixing meanings into place. At most Laclau and Mouffe saw ‘fixations’ as partial. Within this account we shift into an understanding of communication as a pure semiosis, where meaning making is understood as purely about language games. The cultural studies academic Stuart Hall (1983) noted the limitations of

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<td><strong>Saussure</strong></td>
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<td><em>Linguistic structuralism</em></td>
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<td>Sign and code systems are a prison-house of language into which we are born</td>
<td>Sign systems are institutionalized within socio-political apparatus (ISAs). ISAs socialize us into a prison-house of language</td>
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Predetermination through linguistics | Predetermination through an ideological apparatus | Human agency moderates the impact of structures | Pure human agency operative |
this extreme post-structuralist world-view. Essentially, extreme post-structuralism decontextualizes meaning making. It ignores power relationships embedded in identifiable political and economic contexts, and so loses the substance and complexity that a Foucaultian or Gramscian approach has. The Laclau and Mouffe position of "pure semiosis" is ill-equipped to deal with how power relationships emerge between humans engaged in struggles over resources and positions. These struggles involve symbolism and cultural resources but they are not reducible exclusively to mere battles over meaning.

The Gramscian or Foucaultian positions have the advantage of allowing for both human agency and structural limitations. When making meaning we necessarily operate within pre-existing economic, political and linguistic structures, and hence within pre-existing power relations. But these existent structures and power relationships are not immutable or fixed. Rather they set parameters within which the next wave of struggle for power and influence takes place. These contextual parameters may advantage certain individuals and groups engaged in the process, but it does not imprison anyone into a predetermined outcome. Ultimately, both meaning and power relations emerge from a process of ongoing struggle. Within this process there will be those attempting to freeze certain meanings and structures if these advantage their position. And if they have sufficient power or influence they may even be successful for a while. But power is relational and messy, dependent upon the way humans interact in a particular location and time. There will always be gaps and contradictions in any system of control, and there will always be those who wish to circumvent, and will often succeed in circumventing, the mechanisms of control and meaning closure. Ultimately, relational shifts cannot be prevented, hence power shifts are inevitable. Power is always contextually bound, transitory and slipping away from those who try to wield it. Both meanings and power relations are constantly sliding around, migrating and mutating, sometimes in sync with one another and sometimes out of sync. This constant churn creates gaps for those who wish to challenge existent power relations and structures. It is this relational flux that constrains the powerful because the powerful can never permanently pin down relationships that benefit themselves: there will always be some other group pushing back. Power is consequently constrained by the propensity humans have for struggle, and their capacity to find gaps and contradictions in any social structure. No structure, whether it be economic, political or cultural, is ever a permanent prison. At most, structures channel human agency.

The same is true for meaning production. The processes of meaning making are bounded by a multiplicity of human-made power relationships and structures which may restrict human industry and creativity but which can never eliminate it. Even if power relationships and structures do not determine meanings, they are part of the contextual framework within which meaning is made and controlled.

THE STRUGGLE OVER MEANING:
INTRODUCING HEGEMONY

An important dimension of human relationships is the struggle continuously taking place over power and dominance between competing individuals and groups. This competition impacts on both the circulation and production of meaning. All societies have dominant and dominated groups. Naturally,
dominant groups prefer to remain dominant. Dominant groups have two mechanisms for creating and maintaining power:

- using or threatening violence against those challenging their interests
- creating legitimacy for the social arrangements which grant them a dominant position.

**The more legitimacy dominant groups have, the less violence they need to employ**

Ruling groups generally employ a mix of violence and legitimacy to maintain their dominance. Legitimacy is preferable to violence. Power relationships that are viewed as legitimate are easier to maintain. For this reason, the processes of meaning making and circulation are important instruments for making and maintaining power. As Gramsci argued, a key element in building and retaining dominance is manipulating meaning to gain the consent of the dominated. Professional communicators are central to the work of building hegemony, that is, building legitimate and common-sense meanings. Professional communicators are therefore implicated in power struggles.

Meanings are fluid because they are the outcome of a constant struggle between professional communicators. Professional communicators can work for either dominant or dominated groups. Generally speaking, dominant groups have an advantage because they have more resources to employ professional communicators and create or acquire the institutions in which they produce meaning. Think for example of the election process for the US President. Those with resources are disproportionately able to influence the meaning-making process with campaign donations, funding independent advertising campaigns, lobby groups and think tanks that make and circulate ideas. They use their resources to frame the parameters of the political debate, by making certain issues a legitimate, and others an illegitimate, part of the political and media agenda.

Those able to afford the best consultants, policy makers, public opinion researchers, campaigners and communicators increase their chances of success because they increase the likelihood of placing their ideas onto the agenda. This not only gives them access to law makers, but also frames the political and social parameters within which those law makers operate. Similarly, those who can afford the best legal teams are more likely to gain favourable court rulings, which also impacts on legal precedence. For instance, the 2010 US Supreme Court Citizens United v. Federal Election Committee ruling used the First Amendment right to free speech to prevent government from restricting corporations, unions and other groups from funding political campaigns.

Building hegemony requires a mix of professional communicators: lobbyists, policy makers, lawyers, researchers, journalists, advertisers, political strategists, data analysts, designers and so on. This mix of professional communicators is employed not only to make, but also to influence and control the social, cultural, legal and political structures that organize the circulation of meaning. The capacity to buy the most skilled professional communicators does not, however, predetermine the outcome of meaning making. At most, it skews meaning production in favour of those who are socially dominant or powerful at any point in time. Grappling with the nature and extent of this capacity is the task of any serious examination of meaning and power.
Defining hegemony

Professional communicators build hegemony. Hegemony is the creation and maintenance of the legitimacy of dominant and powerful groups. Legitimacy is granted when dominated groups consent to domination by more powerful groups. According to Gramsci this involves intellectuals or professional communicators engaging in three tasks:

- Firstly, professional communicators help to build consent and legitimacy for a society’s dominant groups. They develop support for the interests and goals of powerful groups. They get other groups to accept as ‘natural’ the leadership, ideas and moral codes of the powerful groups. This legitimacy-making work is at its most obvious in our media and education systems.
- Secondly, professional communicators organize alliances and compromises. This work is most visible within parliaments, where bargains are struck between different interests, deals are done and compromises made.
- Thirdly, professional communicators strategically direct political or coercive force. For Gramsci, violence underpins all hegemonies. It may not be necessary to actually use violence against most citizens, but the threat of violence is omnipresent. The simplest example of this is the enforcement of a legal code by the police and judicial system. For most citizens, understanding the consequences of breaking the law is enough to deter them from doing so. Intellectuals and professional communicators organize and legitimate these deterrent forces.

At any particular place and time it is possible to identify the ideas that make powerful groups legitimate. Those ideas are produced and managed by professional communicators working in a variety of institutional settings. These dominant discourses are often opaque, but they establish the parameters within which meaning in any given time and place is made, circulated and contested.

Not everyone accepts the dominant discourse. At any moment there will be individuals and groups unconvinced by the ideas professional communicators circulate. Hall (1980) argues such ‘oppositional’ people negotiate or reject the meanings generated by professional communicators. There are always professional communicators working against the dominant ideas. In any given society we can find groups expressing oppositional ideas. Throughout state socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe those in power had to contend with anti-communist intellectuals and activists. The National Party in South Africa was challenged by anti-apartheid activists. European nationalists oppose migration and multiculturalism within most European countries. In many countries anti-globalization activists are readily identifiable. These activists might communicate via political parties, acts of violence, rallies, independent press, art or music. Some professional communicators consciously work to develop and circulate oppositional ideas designed to undermine hegemonic discourses and promote the interests of dominated or disempowered groups. Such intellectuals, cultural producers and professional communicators are engaged in counter-hegemonic work.

The struggle over ideas matters because meaning has material real-world consequences (Volosinov 1973). What people think informs how they act. And, vice versa, the world created out of the actions of people affects how we think and what we can say. The meanings we make and
circulate have real-world consequences. By changing the nature of meaning one can also change human interactions, social organizations and the distribution of resources. Feminist successes in placing gender issues on the social agenda have, for example, altered human interactions, work practices and resource distribution in western societies. The converse is equally true: changing material relationships affects the way that meaning is made. For example, the significant transfer of wealth in post-apartheid South Africa created a new black elite, transforming many from socialist comrades into free enterprise businesspeople. The struggle to construct and reconstruct societies, cultures and economic systems, in part, involves battles to attach, detach and reattach meanings. These shifts affect more than just how we see and talk about the world, they change the way we live. Our lifeworld is altered. This in turn impacts on power relationships. As new power relationships emerge, so to do new hegemonic struggles of meaning, resources and power.

Hegemonic work is consequently complex. There are constant shifts between competing interests. People are always being positioned and repositioned within these shifting relationships. This produces an infinite number of positions from which people make sense of meaning. No possibility exists of ever producing a permanently stable set of dominant meanings. Instead, hegemonic work involves the never-ending task of dealing with challenges, oppositional decodings, power shifts and ever-changing alliances. Meanings are thus only hegemonic in a temporary sense. They are under challenge from the moment of their conception. Despite this, there will always be professional communicators trying to control and stabilize meaning. This brings us to an important question then: to what extent can meaning be controlled?

THE CONTROL OF MEANING: INTRODUCING IDEOLOGY AND DISCOURSE

Powerful groups attempt to control meaning. In some places and times those attempts will be successful. The meanings they produce and circulate will acquire a hegemonic dominance. That is, they will come to be seen as common sense or true. As we have already argued though, meaning is not entirely controllable, immutable or fixed. Humans will actively read, interpret and decode meanings. Despite the efforts of dominant groups, their efforts to control meaning will always be susceptible to resistance and the possibility that new meanings will emerge.

Efforts to control meaning are related to competition over material and cultural resources. Human society is characterized by scarce resources. Our life chances are set by the share of material and cultural resources we get access to. As long as there are insufficient resources to satisfy all, struggles will occur between groups and individuals. Central to the nature and outcomes of such struggles are the rules of engagement, that is, the acceptable terms on which competition over resources will be undertaken. In a liberal-democratic capitalist society, individuals cannot simply go and forcibly acquire the wealth of others. There are a myriad of laws and institutions that govern the ownership and production of wealth. From Gramscian and Foucaultian perspectives, these rules of engagement are set and maintained via battles over meaning. Powerful groups seek to use meanings to set rules that are favourable to them.
Ideology

The concept of ideology offers a framework for thinking about how the rules and parameters of social life are established and maintained. Ideology is a multi-layered concept that has evolved and grown over the past two centuries. We commonly use the term ‘ideology’ to refer to the beliefs of another person and the values or principles upon which they make decisions and act. It is often used with a negative connotation. When one politician calls another an ‘ideologue’ they insinuate that they are guided by certain beliefs which prevent them seeing how things really are. This everyday use captures some aspects of the idea. Implied here is the notion that there are right and true or wrong and distorted meanings or ways of seeing the world. And that, when the powerful attempt to control meanings, what they do is distort those meanings in order to create a view of an issue that suits their interests, rather than create meanings that represent how things actually are. This way of thinking assumes that someone has corrupted an ideal form of communication and prevented others from seeing the ‘right’ meanings. It posits that there is an actual and final truth that exists and that we can find it.

This problem brings us into rich, fruitful and tricky philosophical terrain. At its most elementary the critical understanding of ideology is captured in the formula: ‘They know not what they do’. That is, people only act as they do because they don’t understand how things really are. For instance, we might say that people only consent to the way our liberal democracy works because we don’t fully appreciate that rather than empower us as citizens, as we are always told, it in fact protects an economic system that enables the rich to protect their wealth and resources. In this view, the empowering narratives of liberal democracy are a set of meanings that obscure the real nature of human relations in a society where a small number of people accumulate the majority of the wealth and resources. A basic ideology critique contends that these social contradictions – between how we are told society works and how it actually works – are hidden from view. For some, an ideal society would emerge if this distortion was revealed.

There are two important rejoinders to this basic ideology critique that we must consider. Firstly, this critique is based upon a belief that an ideal society can be identified and realized. Secondly, contemporary critics have drawn attention to the fact that contemporary citizens often appear to know how things are but nevertheless carry on as if they didn’t know (Žižek 1989). This might be because they don’t care, aren’t too bothered by the social contradictions that affect their lives, or can’t think of anything to do about it. For instance, contemporary citizens are often sceptical that politicians are telling them the truth or really acting in their best interests, but despite this knowledge they still carry on and act as if the politicians do have their best interests at heart. Very rarely do we see citizens in established liberal democracies protest against the way the political system is structured. Ideology does not work by sustaining the sincere belief of subjects. Our disposition towards media representations is often a cynical one; we profess not to believe them or to see through their constructed nature. Instead, ideology works by offering symbolic resources that make social reality functional and possible. To work, ideology requires our participation rather than our belief (Žižek 1989).

The important point here is that merely understanding how things are will not change power relations. Communication or knowledge alone will not solve social problems. We cannot change the
world by talking about it. Ideology doesn’t disguise contradictions; it is instead a way of living with them, a way of making life meaningful despite the contradictions. If we view it this way, then people aren’t dupes for adhering to ideologies, but rather ideologies are a way for people to make social life workable despite its contradictions. Within this approach, ideology or distorted communication cannot disappear while social contradictions exist. And, because social contradictions cannot be resolved, ideology cannot disappear. Ideology doesn’t mask social contradictions, it is produced out of them.

**Discourse**

Michel Foucault’s (1972) notion of a ‘discursive formation’ offers an explanation of how meanings get made by people in specific contexts. According to Foucault, societies create institutions. He looked at prisons, clinics and asylums. Each institution develops its own set of practices and discourses. Those working within such institutions have to learn the interconnected practices and discourses appropriate to that institutional site. Practices are the acceptable way of doing things. Discourses are the acceptable ‘language’ within that site. A person is unlikely to be recruited into an institutional site unless they are able to demonstrate a compatibility with practices or discourses already operative within it. They are unlikely to remain employed unless they continue to conform to the institutions’ practices and discourses.

Conformity is a key governing mechanism within Foucault’s system. This implies recognizing negative consequences for failing to conform. Importantly, Foucault’s system does not necessitate seeing us as prisoners of natural language structures. Instead, it allows space for active human choice regarding conformity to existing practices and discourses. But whether by choice, or not, adherence to a discourse limits what one is able to say and, over time, what one might think. According to Foucault, a discourse governs the knowledge and ideas that can appear. Foucault explored the way in which discourses constrained the emergence of knowledge and concluded that parameters were set by establishing linguistic boundaries and organizing fields that contained acceptable meanings and practices. These organizing fields not only make certain ideas impossible and others possible; they actually make certain ideas inevitable. Implicitly, the struggle to make new meanings is enmeshed within, and constrained by, sets of power relationships within the spaces where intellectuals work.

Both Foucault and Gramsci recognize the contradictory nature of human existence – in which although humans are free to act, it is a constrained freedom. Ultimately then, Gramsci’s notion of ‘hegemony’ and Foucault’s ‘discourse’ conceptually overlap. Both recognize structural conditions to meaning making. At the same time, they recognize that people have a choice to act either as change agents or as conservatives because, up to a point, intellectuals and professional communicators can choose between the institutional and discursive arrangements available within their context. Fluidity and struggle are central to both the Gramscian and Foucaultian world-views. In each conception intellectuals can choose how they relate to existing power relationships; those power relationships are not fixed, but mutate as struggles are won or lost.

What Foucault offers is a means for conceptualizing how discourse is a potentially powerful hegemonic tool for social control. Discursive formations have the power to exclude from discussion
certain questions or issues. This forecloses debate and so predetermines what conclusions may be reached. There are many instances of discourses automatically excluding alternative perspectives. For example, free market discourses can block adherents from grappling with the notion that capitalism may disadvantage some people with merit and undermine their capacity for achievement. Similarly, socialist discourses can block adherents from confronting the view that competition may generate achievement and wealth, while state interventionism may promote dependence and undermine wealth making.

**REPRESENTATION AND POWER**

Representation is the social process of making and exchanging meaning (Hall 1997). Media do not simply reflect or mirror reality. Media are social processes. People interact with others to construct a view of reality. These social interactions unfold between people with different levels of access to economic, cultural and symbolic resources, institutions and rituals. By social construction of reality we mean that reality as we understand it is produced out of social relationships between people. There is a real world out there, with real material things in it and events that actually happen, but as humans we can only come to understand that world out of the social process of interacting with each other. For us then, there is no understanding of reality outside of our social interactions and cultural practices. The ‘re’ prefix in representation is important. It is a process of re-presenting reality to others. Representations are social productions: their meaning depends on who creates and circulates them, the cultural schema within which that circulation takes place, and who receives them. Representation takes place within the context of power relations. Some people have more power to shape not only particular meanings, but also the contexts within which meanings are produced, distributed and received.

Media representations shape how people think about and act in the world. Representations also have significant affective dimensions. They anticipate, construct and amplify how we feel about things. They reinforce or challenge our attitudes. They arouse our emotions: fear, passion, anxieties. Representation is not simply a rational process of creating and circulating inert bits of information. The question is not always about whether or not representations are accurate, but how they subtly frame events in ways that position individuals in the social order. We are interested in how representations mediate relations between people. Relations between people are complex and messy, and are constituted as much by how we feel, and our relative level of power towards each other, as they are by empirical facts.

Representation is a process embedded in how we make sense of the world and in doing so it shapes the world. Representation does this subtly and over a long period of time. Images and narratives do not have meaning on their own. They only become meaningful in relation to other images and narratives that have preceded them or are produced in relation to. As groups of people attempt to ‘fix’ particular representations, other groups will attempt to create different ones. In doing so they are making claims on how we ought to make sense of, and act in, the world. An important philosophical question to consider is the extent to which representations accurately portray the world ‘as it actually is’. We can distinguish two responses to this question:
• A post-modern view that representations can never be finally fixed. This view celebrates the possibilities opened up by a continuous game of making meaning. The capacity of humans to create new meanings, and new ways of seeing the world, opens up the possibility that power relationships can be continuously rearranged via meaning making. This position arguably creates a significant problem. By celebrating the constant play of meaning making it loses the capacity to distinguish one meaning as better or more plausible than another. The game of meaning making can become divorced from material reality and daily life.

• A hegemonic view that powerful groups aim to fix meanings. This is a complex process that unfolds over time. When groups have power they can fix meaning, as other groups acquire power though they may be able to unfix and create new meanings. This is not a teleological process. Each new set of meanings is not necessarily better than the last. Importantly, this position retains the view that we can distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ meanings by judging them against our engagement with and experiences in the world. This view is characterized by humans who make and defend judgements about the value and truth of their meanings.

Considering these two positions enables us to reflect upon our own position about the representations we create and use to make sense of the world.

Control over representation

While some people have more power to control the resources used to create meanings, and the structures and spaces where meanings circulate, no one has complete control over how meanings are encoded and decoded. Powerful groups have the capacity to control media institutions and technologies, and the resources to employ and direct professional communicators. That level of control only gets them so far, because representations work discursively. Once produced, messages have to be circulated. They become meaningful when incorporated into social practices and institutions. Institutions can’t entirely control those social practices. The process of representation is contingent on the actors in each moment, and their relative power to influence or control others. The moments of ‘encoding’ and ‘decoding’ messages are ‘relatively autonomous’ (Hall 1980). A television programme is produced within the institutional structures, technical infrastructure and production practices of a television network.

The way television producers encode messages is shaped by the way they anticipate others will decode their messages. Few professional communicators want to be misunderstood by their audience, and most communicators need to pay attention to the power relations they are embedded within. For a professional communicator working on a television news programme for instance, they most likely anticipate how their messages will be perceived by political and corporate elites on one hand, and by their audience on the other. Their messages are discursively shaped by their sense of how it fits within a broader cultural hegemony that reflects both the interests of political elites and the desires of the audience. Professionals pay careful attention to wider cultural discourses and power structures: the interests of political elites, corporate sponsors and advertisers, and audience feedback through ratings and market research. The producer isn’t an autonomous creator of a message, but rather working at one interval in an ongoing process of representation. We might argue though that they are working
at a particularly influential interval. The messages they encode can be distributed to a mass audience, and individuals in that audience can decode the messages however they like, but they are probably unlikely to be able to encode and distribute messages. Even though our media system is increasingly interactive, this remains a crucial distinction.

Once a message is encoded and distributed though, it can only have an effect – influence, entertain, instruct or persuade – once it has been decoded. The meaning structure used to encode a message may not necessarily be the same as the meaning structures in which the message is decoded. Even though professional communicators might set the agenda and frame messages, they can’t ever guarantee what their readers and audiences will do with those messages. The process of representation is always open-ended to some degree. We must then always pay attention to what audiences do with representations, in addition to examining the messages themselves.

Human communication is characterized by struggles over power and meaning. Hall (1980) suggests three possible positions within which messages might be decoded: dominant, negotiated and oppositional.

- When the message is decoded as the encoder intended, the process of representation operates within a **dominant** hegemonic code. The social exchange constructed here is one of consent or agreement between encoder and decoder. The message attempts to be hegemonic in the sense that it claims its own truth and legitimacy; it achieves this hegemony where the decoder consents to that claim. The work of professional communicators is to encode messages in such a way that their claims are legitimized by others.

- A **negotiated** process of representation takes place when the decoder understands quite well the claim to truth or legitimacy the encoder is making, but they resist consenting to the claim. The decoder acknowledges the legitimacy and power of the message at the same time they mark out their own position, adapting the message to their own local conditions and social relations. The capacity of the decoder to negotiate depends to some degree on their relative autonomy, power and cultural and economic resources. Negotiated processes of representation demonstrate the messy and contingent nature of power. The decoder simultaneously acknowledges the existence of the power and legitimate dominant code and at the same time they resist it with whatever local resources they have available. Much communication, and the ongoing work of hegemony and representation, is about these everyday negotiations.

- An **oppositional** exchange takes place where a decoder understands perfectly well the encoded message, but rejects it entirely. Oppositional decoding threatens to disrupt power relations. If a large group of people refuse to decode the intended message of the encoder, and that oppositional decoding is backed up by other economic, social and cultural resources, it may be the sign of a hegemony breaking apart, or losing its legitimacy.

Hall’s model is useful for thinking about how in a society at any given time there is a complex process of meaning making and representation taking place. The process of encoding and decoding gives us a useful rubric for mapping out a variety of positions from which individuals and groups might have the capacity to encode, circulate, decode and recirculate messages.
Encoders with power are likely to have access to the means of communication from which they can create and distribute messages. Their messages are likely to be decoded as intended, and consented to, by those aligned to the ruling hegemony. They might also find other groups undertaking a negotiated decoding of the messages at local levels. This process of negotiation is part of managing hegemony, but doesn’t fundamentally disrupt it. These other groups might not be happy with the meanings, but they understand that in practice they need to consent to them.

In addition to encoders with power are encoders seeking to build power. These individuals and groups also largely operate within the ruling or dominant hegemony, but are seeking to negotiate a different position within that structure, to acquire more economic and cultural power. They are often perceived within the process of representation as an accepted part of the debate. For instance, in the United States, a Democratic President might find conservative media disagreeing with much of what he or she has to say, but ultimately not disputing their shared liberal-democratic-capitalist hegemony. What is taking place here is a continuing negotiation within a hegemonic structure that the various encoders and decoders largely agree upon. This process of encoders and decoders, either aligned to the ruling hegemony, involved in a process of active negotiation within it, or ambivalent about it, characterizes the representation process that most of us are familiar with on a day-to-day basis. For those of us who live in societies like the United States, United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and Western Europe, the media, cultural and political processes we are embedded within are part of a liberalized order where the fundamental power relationships are not in dispute, but within those frameworks groups are negotiating and jostling for resources.

Distinct from dominant and negotiated processes of representation are those societies characterized by encoders and/or decoders opposed to the ruling hegemony. Any society at any given time will have individuals and groups fundamentally opposed to the ruling hegemony. For the process of representation, though, this opposition is only of consequence if those groups are able to gain access to the means of communication through which to create and distribute messages, and if there are corresponding groups who will decode their messages as intended. That is, if they have the capacity to create, circulate and have their messages made meaningful by others.

#IFTHEYGUNNEDMEDOWN

The shooting of Mike Brown, an unarmed black teenager, by police in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 drew attention to how news organizations draw on social media profiles to depict victims or perpetrators of crime.

Some news organizations ran a photo of Brown in his graduation cap and gown, while many others used a photo of Brown wearing a basketball singlet and making a hand gesture that naïve viewers might interpret as a gang sign.
The use of an image that implied Brown was a member of a gang prompted many black Americans to post contrasting images from their social media accounts to Twitter using the hashtag #iftheygunnedmedown. Many featured young black men in formal dress for church, military or graduation in one image, while in the other image they wore street wear that could be used to suggest they are gang members.

Like the images used for Brown, people drew attention to the way that selective use of images from their social media profiles could be used to construct very different representations of their identities. By constructing their identity one way or another the media could invoke differing perceptions of the extent to which the use of force by police was legitimate.

**Figure 1.2** Images circulating on Twitter using #iftheygunnedmedown

Consider these images. How do the two images of the same individual represent them in different ways? What symbols in the images convey different meanings that you associate with that individual? How do the images position the individuals differently in power relationships?

Examine images of yourself on your own social media profile. Find two contrasting images. Consider the way in which the images represent your identity differently. If the media were reporting, could they use the images to tell different stories about your character? Would characteristics like your gender, ethnicity or sexuality be at play in the interpretation of those images? If not, would the images suggest different aspects of your character that might affect your reputation?

You can find links to the images and stories about these images on the *Media and Society* website study.sagepub.com/carahandlouw
MEDIATIZATION AND MEDIA RITUALS

Media form a part of the rhythms, texture and background of everyday life. As much as we might be interested in the particular meanings media circulate, we also need to pay attention to how media play a foundational role in organizing our day-to-day lives (Couldry and Hepp 2013). Mediatization is the process by which media become more and more a part of how social, political and cultural processes operate. Mediatization unfolds in three ways. Firstly, media become increasingly important to understanding and organizing relationships with one another. We come to know and understand the world and our place in it via media representations and technologies. Secondly, social institutions and processes gradually adapt to the routines and practices of media institutions. Politics and government is now substantially organized around the production and management of media narratives. Professional sport is largely a performance for television broadcasts. Thirdly, our private and public spaces are organized around material media technologies. The television is an important object in the layout of our homes. Urban spaces are filled with mobile reception towers and WiFi coverage that enable us to remain connected to the web via our smartphones.

Couldry and Hepp (2013) suggest that we see human history as ‘a process of intensifying mediatisation’. Over time the societies we live in become increasingly media-dense. They are filled in with media objects. Daily rhythms are organized around flows of media: from radio in the car on the way to work, to television in the evenings, to smartphones while lying in bed. More of our individual attention is paid to media, and more of our institutions address themselves to the way the media works.

Media frame and represent the social world in routine and organized ways. Couldry (2003: 1) suggests that we ought to pay attention to the ‘media’s role in ordering our lives, and organising social space’. In media-dense societies media are essential to how we imagine our ‘lives together as social beings’ via political institutions and shared national and cultural identities. Media are the primary site through which we come to know the larger social and political structures within which any meanings, practices and identities might make sense to us. Regardless of the specific messages the media convey, their primary claim is often simply that they reflect our world, way of life and values within power relationships. Media promote the idea that the social world has a ‘centre’ of power and legitimacy, and that they have a ‘privileged relation to that “centre”’ (Couldry 2003: 45). Media ‘naturalize’ the idea ‘that there is a social centre to be re-presented to us’ and that the media are the legitimate site for producing and managing that process of representation. Processes of representation are organized in media rituals which legitimate the idea that ‘the media is our access to the social centre’ (2003: 2).

Through media rituals we see how the media ‘stand in’ for the social world and position themselves as central to the ‘holding together’ of society (Couldry 2003: 4). Professional communicators don’t just make meanings, they fashion the social relationships and processes that hold society together. Sometimes these rituals can appear spectacular and extraordinary: such as watching a royal marriage, or the Olympic Games, or the inauguration of a President, or during natural disasters. But importantly, media rituals are also just written into everyday life every time we watch the news at breakfast time, log on to Facebook on our smartphone, or talk with a colleague about something we saw on television the night before. Media rituals frame reality in the sense that they draw our attention in a variety of spectacular and ordinary ways to shared values and ideas.
Media rituals frame what is ‘in’ and ‘out’ of the picture. For example, what politics is, who does it and where it takes place. By ‘going’ to parliament each day to report on the events there, interacting with the politicians and advisors there to narrative events, media rituals frame where politics happens and who participates in it. Over time this representation of politics seems predictable, natural and legitimate. As ordinary citizens we come to assume that politics is how it is represented through media rituals. Some people are ‘in’ the frame and have access to the symbolic resources to influence representation, while others do not.

Access to meaning-making sites is uneven. Media present themselves as the legitimate sites through which we imagine society. While media claim to speak for us, those who actually speak are those with the economic, political and cultural resources to create, access, regulate and use media institutions, technologies and processes to manage representation. Media production is characterized by an uneven distribution of symbolic resources. In a media-dense society the media have the symbolic power to construct and name reality (Couldry 2003). From this power flows the legitimacy of economic and political relationships and cultural identities and practices. Media power seems legitimate because it seems common sense to us that the media are the sites through which we imagine our lives and our relations to others. For all of us living in media-dense societies it is impossible to imagine day-to-day life, the political process, cultural practices, leisure and entertainment without the media. The myth of the mediated centre, that there is a centre to the social world and the media give us access to it, is the basis upon which we accept the media’s centrality to our lives. Media empower and disempower because they are sites where symbolic power is concentrated, organized and regulated. Those with access to media institutions have the symbolic resources to make and distribute meanings.

While the powerful might use media to produce particular ideas, the efficacy of that activity depends in the first instance on the legitimacy of the media as representative of the social centre. The media themselves need to build and maintain everyday legitimacy in order to be sites where symbolic power is concentrated. Without the media being continuously incorporated into our everyday lives, without most of us switching on and tuning in everyday, they wouldn’t be sites of power and legitimacy in the first place, through which particular messages and representations could flow. Media rituals then are the fundamental ground on which media power can be established and maintained.

**REPRESENTATION AS A SOCIAL PROCESS**

**THE OCCUPY PROTESTS AND CASUALLY-PEPPER-SPRAY-EVERYTHING COP MEME**

Representation is a social system involving the continuous production and circulation of meaning. People interact with each other to represent events. Media representations work intertextually. That is, meanings are transferred from one text to another. Texts make new

(Continued)
Internet memes demonstrate the intertextual and social process of representation in action. The first image below is an image from a protest at the University of California (Davis) in 2011. The protest was part of the global Occupy movement. When students refused to disband a campus police officer sprayed them with pepper spray. The cop’s act was a violent one. As an authority figure he used physical force against people. The police are licensed to do that by the state and the university. The act though is also a symbolic one. When police use force against citizens they demonstrate to them what will happen if they do not obey the law.

The cop’s act set off a chain of events where the student protestors, university management, news organizations and the public interacted with each other in an effort to represent the event in different ways.

The protest was videoed and uploaded to YouTube. In the video the crowd can be heard chanting ‘the whole world is watching’ as the cop sprays the protestors with pepper spray. The protestors captured the act on camera. The protestors understood that they could use videos to bear witness to the event. In doing so, they were able to ‘re-present’ it. They take

![Image of a campus police officer pepper-spraying student protestors at UC Davis](image_url)

**Figure 1.3** A campus police officer pepper-spraying student protestors at UC Davis
the act from its original context and turn it into a media text. That text then circulated rapidly through social networks. The ‘re-presentation’ of the act symbolizes the excessive use of force by the powerful. The Occupy protests aimed to represent the ‘99%’ of ordinary people against the world’s privileged ‘1%’. The representation of the cop pepper-spraying the protestors symbolizes – stands in for – the entrenched privilege and blatant use of power the Occupy movement as protesting against in its slogan ‘We are the 99%’.

The protestors’ videos of the incident became a news story. The university needed to respond to the way the video of the protest represented the institution and its relationship with students. The Chancellor of the university organized a media conference. This was an attempt to ‘counter’ the meanings and narratives circulating in conjunction with the pepper-spray video. The university attempted to control how the event was represented. They did that by inviting selected media organizations to the media conference, and excluding students from the venue. The students responded to being excluded by forming a silent protest outside. When the Chancellor eventually emerged they formed a silent guard all the way from the venue to her car. This silent protest was also filmed and the video circulated widely online. The protestors used silence to represent their exclusion. In doing so they drew attention to how the powerful maintain power by controlling who speaks where and when, by

Figure 1.4 An internet meme where the pepper-spray cop sprays Bambi

(Continued)
(Continued)

attempting to control who gets to represent events. When the Chancellor excluded students from the press conference, she attempted to work with the police and media organizations to control how the event was represented.

Following this event, images of the cop pepper-spraying students were widely reappropriated and recirculated. The pepper-spraying cop represented the use of excessive force, the attempt of the powerful to control who gets to speak, the disrespect for democratic values. The cop more broadly represented the use of force against ordinary people, the undermining of democratic rights and the policing of public space.

The powerful – like the Chancellor and the police – use strategies to attempt to control media representations. They use their relations with media and their resources to organize media events and control who gets access to those events. In contrast, ordinary people use tactics to resist those meanings.

One way this unfolded with the pepper-spray cop was by using the cop as a symbol of excessive power and ‘remixing’ his image into other popular culture texts. The image of the cop worked intertextually to create new representations. In the image above, the cop pepper-sprays Bambi. To make sense of this image we need to understand both texts it references: the pepper-spray cop and the film Bambi. In the image, the cop is crudely superimposed over a scene from Bambi. In doing so, the innocence of the scene from Bambi evident in the joyful expressions on the characters’ faces and the colourful animation is juxtaposed with the dark, menacing and violent presence of the cop. The cop is larger than the characters from the animation, towering over them and his head is cropped out of the frame, as if to make him a faceless and distant figure. This image is one of many examples where the cop was super-imposed onto another scene – a movie like Bambi, an important historical moment like the Declaration of Independence, or a cultural icon like a Renaissance painting. The creators of these images were able to repeat this juxtaposition by ‘photoshopping’ the cop over images in this way. Meaning is created via the repeated gesture of imposing the cop in scenes that evoked the innocence of childhood memory or shared cultural history and values. We can see throughout this example how representation works both as a social process, constructing how we understand and act in the world, and as a process in which some people have more power than others.

Map out the array of actors involved in attempting to represent the student protest at UC Davis. What were their preferred representations of the event and why? What resources and techniques did they use to create their preferred representations? Who did they interact with to create their preferred representations?

Find other examples of the pepper-spray cop meme.
What texts are referenced in the memes?
How is meaning created in the interplay between the texts?
What do the texts represent?

For links to the images and videos in this case visit the Media and Society website study.sagepub.com/carahandlouw
CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we defined meaning and power. We introduced several significant theoretical concepts that offer an account of the relationship between meaning and power: hegemony, ideology and discourse.

- Hegemony draws our attention to the continual and ongoing struggle over meanings and the meaning-making process as groups work to make and maintain their legitimacy and power. This also encouraged us to consider how meaning making is embedded in real world relationships and material resources. Making and maintaining legitimacy is interrelated with access to economic, political and cultural resources.
- Ideology is useful for critically considering the meanings that are produced out of struggles and contradictions. Ideology offers us ways of seeing how we make everyday life meaningful despite its contradictions and antagonisms.
- Discourse enables us to consider how institutions produce frameworks of meaning that organize social practices. Meaning doesn’t just govern what we think, but structures the social spaces and institutions in which we act. Individuals act within the coordinates of institutions. This is a permissive mode of control. Institutions reward some ideas, practices and identities while discouraging others. Individuals have the freedom to do or say what they like, but learn that resources are shifted towards preferred ideas and practices.

Each concept – hegemony, ideology and discourse – leads us to a conceptualization of meaning making as a continual process where, despite attempts to fix and control meaning by some groups, we always retain the agency to think and act in our own right, resisting the intended meanings and actions, and creating new meanings in their place.

Being able to make and circulate meaning requires material resources to organize and fund the creation of meaning. These material resources include tangible things like buildings, tools and machinery. Material resources enable individuals to acquire and control the time, knowledge, skills and social relationships required to make meaning, attract attention and manage populations. The creation and dissemination of representations of ways of life creates a cultural schema of ideas, values, practices and desires within which people live their lives and fashion their identities. While we can never guarantee what people will do with representations, the opportunity to structure, in the first instance, the flows of symbolic resources people use to make sense of the world affords power.

The power of meaning-making institutions is embedded in their capacity to construct and control not just meanings but the social spaces and frameworks within which we all make and circulate meaning. In the next chapter we examine how cultural production was institutionalized in the twentieth century. We chart the emergence of a networked, interactive and participatory culture industry towards the century’s end. The development of flexible, networked and informational modes of production has enabled forms of control based on continuously monitoring and responding to an open-ended circulation of meaning. In the rest of this book we consider how meaning and power
work in today’s systems of media and cultural production. The critical debates extending from hegemony, ideology and discourse enable us to develop a reflective account of the place of media in facilitating social life and power relationships.

FURTHER READING

The work of Stuart Hall and Nick Couldry is instructive in developing an account of media representation. Stuart Hall’s ‘Encoding/decoding’ essay (1980), originally published in 1973, provides a seminal account of the process by which meanings are inscribed into texts and deciphered by audiences. Hall’s book Representation, published with several colleagues in 1997 (and in an updated edition in 2013), provides a clear and accessible explanation of the cultural and media processes of representation. In the past decade Nick Couldry’s work on mediatization, media power and rituals has further advanced our understanding of media representations within a media-dense society. Couldry draws our attention to how practices of media representation are embedded in everyday cultural practices, social spaces and power relationships. In this chapter we also referred to Foucault’s notion of discourse. For more advanced readers his book Discipline and Punish (1977) is a good place to start. In that book he defines the relationship between power, knowledge and representation.


