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# Encyclopedia of Communication Theory

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*A SAGE Reference Publication*  
SAGE Publications, Inc.  
Thousand Oaks, California

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SAGE Publications, Inc.  
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Thousand Oaks, California 91320  
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SAGE Publications Ltd.  
1 Oliver's Yard  
55 City Road  
London, EC1Y 1SP  
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SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.  
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area  
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044  
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.  
33 Pekin Street #02-01  
Far East Square  
Singapore 048763

Printed in the United States of America.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Encyclopedia of communication theory / Stephen W. Littlejohn, Karen A. Foss, editors.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4129-5937-7 (cloth)

1. Communication—Encyclopedias. 2. Information theory—Encyclopedias. 3. Linguistics—Encyclopedias. I. Littlejohn, Stephen W. II. Foss, Karen A.

P87.5.E496 2009

302.203—dc22 2009002948

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

09 10 11 12 13 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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<i>Publisher:</i>	Rolf A. Janke
<i>Acquisitions Editor:</i>	Jim Brace-Thompson
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<i>Typesetter:</i>	C&M Digital (P) Ltd.
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<i>Marketing Manager:</i>	Amberlyn McKay

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## SIMULATION AND MEDIA

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Simulation is commonly described as a process of replication that produces a copy without an original; it is a duplication of an object or concept that lacks an exact corresponding reality. This copy is called a *simulacrum* (plural, *simulacra*). Amusement parks, reality television, and some art forms are frequently cited instances of simulacra. For example, on the reality television show *Survivor*, places, situations, and interactions have been constructed by media to depict a real that is not authentic. Simulation is highly relevant in communication theory because media and technology are instruments that reproduce fabricated signs and symbols to influence how humans connect. This entry will define the theory of simulation, overview its association with signs and media, provide examples of simulation in operation, and discuss how simulation works to change identities, ways of knowing, and social relationships.

Simulation has been examined by various scholars in many disciplines. Plato, Friedrich Nietzsche, Gilles Deleuze, and Walter Benjamin are among the many philosophers who have looked at the relationship between reality and copies. However, French theorist and critic Jean Baudrillard specifically pointed to contemporary media's role in simulation. Baudrillard's simulacrum is typically characterized as a postmodern theory of how media, technology, and consumerism have detached the once natural relationship between signs and reality.

Baudrillard noted three orders (types) of simulation, each corresponding with different points in history. First, in an earlier premodern era, signs accurately represented an object or concept (e.g., a painting). Second-order simulacra corresponded with the industrial revolution, where mass production blurred the relationship between reality and copies (e.g., prints of a painting). In the third order, as a result of technology and media, signs are now detached from the object they symbolize, and these disconnected signs comprise the simulacrum and its related concept, the hyperreal (e.g., mass produced t-shirts with imprinted images of Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans—originally a mass media critique that has now been commercialized). In present consumer societies, Baudrillard argued that copies are not necessarily superior or

inferior to the objects they represent. Instead, as signs no longer accurately stand for what they represent, copies precede and ultimately become their own kind of truth and reality.

Simulation creates the simulacrum that eventually leads to the hyperreal. Although simulacra are copies without an original, the hyperreal is made up of a manic assortment of copies of simulacra. In this process, people have become more preoccupied with consuming things and less concerned with the functions of the things they consume. Yet what they actually consume are products of capitalism that aggressively advertise reality to be something it is not. In the hyperreal, a cookie is no longer a cookie. Instead, it is a mass-marketed symbol of loving grandmother's down-home cooking, endearing childhood memories of the smell of baked goods, and a form of comfort and happiness. People do not simply use products; instead, they tap into fabricated signs and symbols that media put onto the products. Baudrillard used the term *ecstasy* to further describe the exaggerated spiral that things become in the hyperreal; things take on a larger-than-life form, and people become overwhelmed and confused by the dizzying amount of meaning embedded in messages. Ecstasy in the hyperreal is being crushed in a Walmart line on Black Friday as people rush to buy cookies, *Survivor* DVDs, and Warhol t-shirts.

The roles of media and technology in shaping reality are important in this discussion. What is meant by real or true depends on how it is viewed and defined, but Baudrillard argued that reality has been replaced. There is not an existing reality that media portray; rather, media actually create and moderate their own form of the truth (e.g., photojournalists asking subjects to recreate a scene because the first shots were blurred or not up to par). In cultures dominated by hyperaggressive media and consumption, media exert power when they make and then patch together copies of copies that end up influencing how humans live.

In the simulacrum, people become oblivious to the fact that their experiences are not real, a process that profoundly shapes their perceptions and relationships. Viewers who watch and engage in *Survivor* do not reflect upon the fact that the show is constructed. Viewers are not pretending that the program depicts a fabricated world; instead, they are unaware of how much has been created. Baudrillard

offered the example of illness to show this point. If someone fakes being sick, he or she does not actually experience symptoms; he or she is simply pretending, and the truth is not lost. However, if someone feigns an illness, he or she actually produces real symptoms (as experienced by psychosomatics), but does not know the symptoms are fake. A simulated illness blurs the difference between reality and simulation, as it is unclear if feigned symptoms are real or not, since they are claimed to be felt.

The concept of simulation allows scholars and critics to explore various issues, including politics, entertainment, medicine, military engagements, and to explore how people relate to space and nature. For example, pharmaceutical firms have controversially promoted medications in television advertisements, many of which are for ailments that revolve around disorders and syndromes. One example, Restless Leg Syndrome (RLS), is characterized by twitching and aching body parts that lead to pain and sleeplessness. RLS is based on something that exists—that legs do twitch. However, the question is whether twitchy legs have been turned into a syndrome by patching together signs to create a patterned and marketable disease for people who may not have it. RLS medications were created to treat Parkinson's disease, but were found to coincidentally decrease leg twitches and were then aggressively advertised to RLS sufferers to increase sales. In this example, media, technology, and consumerism play powerful roles in reproducing syndromes that defy traditional definitions. The controversy is whether or not a pharmaceutical industry whose livelihood depends on drug sales turned twitches into a syndrome and then aggressively marketed the medications to inform consumers that they are inflicted with RLS.

This is not to say that ailments are not real or that developing medications is not needed. However, it does allow a critic to see how the line is blurred between treating people with preexisting illnesses and creating syndromes with vague assortments of symptoms so others who do not meet the requirements can be diagnosed. In other words, it is unclear which came first—the syndrome or the drugs used to treat it. This process affects how ailments are perceived, diagnosed, and treated.

Essentially, media and technology produce goods and concepts that exaggerate the way things are. Again, there is often some remnant of material

reality to simulated phenomena. However, media take nuggets of signs, create other signs, separate them from their original object, and distort and manufacture them into something that does not exist. As a result, people are oblivious of their meaningless, bizarre, and acontextual worlds.

Scholars who use simulation are ultimately concerned with how media manipulate signs to promote consumption, to produce value systems and ways of knowing, and to impact social relationships. There are consequences when people live fabricated lives, where experiences occur without understanding histories or contexts, and when they lose track of different ways of knowing. Simulation allows scholars to see larger contexts, such as how taking drugs to treat ailments happens in the context of living in societies that promote sedentary lifestyles and psychological alienation that increase our illnesses. In the RLS example, that people are told they need medication can be an artificial need posed as being natural by powerful companies and a myth encouraged by consumerism. Media feed these needs as they constantly advertise drugs and encourage people to ask their doctors. Essentially, in the simulacrum, some syndromes and disorders are created to make consuming medication seem like the only natural treatment.

Although simulation can be a provocative theory of commodity culture in an age of media, it can be used as a theoretical lens and tool to study technologically advanced cultures to recognize that the social relationships people have are often mediated by consumption. Simulation underpins economic, political, and social processes and functions, where reconstructed signs control the way humans think and act. The products and concepts people think about and consume end up mediating their communication and relationships with others and with their environment. This can be observed in many conversations, where a great deal of talk revolves around consumption and technology (e.g., purchasing, managing, and protecting homes and cars, shopping, holidays, entertainment, finances, etc.). Simulation asks us to realize that media tell people to want, buy, throw away, want, and then buy again, creating a simulated, ecstasy-filled hyperreal lifestyle that distracts us from thinking about their lives, and each other, differently.

*Elizabeth A. Dickinson*

*See also* Critical Theory; Media and Mass Communication Theories; Postmodern Theory; Power and Power Relations; Semiotics and Semiology

#### Further Reading

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## SKILL, COMMUNICATION

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*See* Competence Theories; Communication Skills Theories; Intercultural Communication Competence; Cognitive Theories

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## SOCIAL ACTION MEDIA STUDIES

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Social action media studies is a research approach that emphasizes the interpretive activity of media audiences in everyday contexts. Social action media scholars typically employ ethnographic methods in their investigations. The claims arising from this research are often idiographic in scope—that is, the explanations of audience behavior are limited to the conditions of the case under study. However, the findings of social action media studies have also contributed to broader conceptualizations of the cultural forms, identities, and competencies of media audiences.

In many respects, this approach posits a profoundly different view of audiences from the media-effects tradition, or even as compared to other active-audience traditions such as uses and gratifications. In the social action perspective, media

content does not possess an essential meaning, nor do the explanations for media usage or effects originate in the individual's exposure to messages. Instead, social action media studies begin from the assumption that human beings construct meanings of media technologies and texts within collective frames of understanding. This assumption sets the basic terms for asking such questions as the following: What are the social practices of media usage in particular contexts? How are these practices learned, shaped, or altered over time? How do people select aspects of the mediated culture as resources for defining their roles as social actors? In what ways do the uses and interpretations of media help to engender in social actors a sense of cultural identification, solidarity, or resistance?

As these questions indicate, analysis of the protean quality or variability of meaning lies at the heart of social action studies. The semiotic domains of everyday life give rise to—and place constraints on—the situated performances of media usage. But the mutability of these symbolic resources also makes it possible for people to exercise considerable creativity in how they interpret and manipulate media texts for their own purposes.

### Social Action Theory

The theory of social action media studies derives from a variety of constructivist philosophical and scientific traditions. As Gerard Schoening and James Anderson have noted, these traditions—which include cultural hermeneutics, phenomenology, pragmatism, and the interpretive sociologies—commonly subscribe to a view of human beings as sentient, self-reflexive agents who construct reality through their own communicative efforts. The works of Max Weber and Alfred Schutz are particularly important in elaborating, respectively, the ideas of social action and intersubjectivity. Another theme of major significance is that of the everyday world. The everyday has been treated somewhat differently by Schutz, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and other thinkers. For media scholars, the term has come to signify the self-evident base of social knowledge that enables people to function easily in contemporary life. Not only are the media of mass communication concrete features of the everyday, but also they constantly circulate signs that audience members use simultaneously as