5 Interactionism and structuration

Introduction

This chapter focuses on theories of **interactionism**. Interactionism is a strand of theory about the way we, individually and in groups, act in our relation to others in specific social environments (see Atkinson and Housley 2003). Interactionist media theory derives from the sociological tradition of symbolic interactionism that has its origins in the Chicago School from where Erving Goffman, the first theorist we will discuss, plied his trade. According to another Chicago School theorist, Herbert Blumer, interactionism is founded on three basic premises:

1 'human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them' (Blumer 1969: 2): actions and meanings are therefore self-generated in everyday situations - not in any way determined by structures of production, as structuralists would generally argue.

2 'the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows' (Blumer 1969: 2): actions and meanings are self-generated, but only after they emerge in social relations with others. In short, no one lives in an autonomous social vacuum.

3 'meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he [sic] encounters' (Blumer 1969: 2): this process of interpretation requires that one can generate meanings (as in premise 1) and also 'select, check, suspend, regroup, and transform the meanings' (Blumer 1969: 5) according to one's actions and situations.

Unlike behaviourist and structuralist theories that tend to emphasize the power of media texts and technologies to determine our meanings of the social world, interactionist media theory considers the dynamic relations between producers, texts, technologies and interpretative audiences. This marks a particular shift in focus from structuralism. Whereas structuralists aim to identify how we are located within media structures, interactionists are more interested in how media interact with the structures of our lives. This is a complex concern in modern societies. Over the course of the past century, the means by which we can communicate and interact with others have

proliferated wholesale. Long gone are the days when face-to-face interaction was the only means to see, hear or talk to others. It has become a cliché to observe how people phone their neighbours or email their work colleagues when it would make more sense - at least to a traditionalist - to take the short walk to meet them personally. All the perspectives discussed in this chapter are concerned with this dynamic interaction mix in which we are all engaged. Media are defined as social phenomena that contribute to - rather than psychologically influence or ideologically structure - our social environment and consciousness. Labelling and moral panic theories, for example, do not claim that media *per se* construct fear and panic in society, but that media are a significant component in collective, interpretative processes that together generate societal reaction to deviance. Societal reaction is self-generated - not imposed by external or internalized power structures. Media are part of society - not ideologically opposed to certain social trends. However, Giddens's **structuration theory** is an attempt to marry structuralism and interactionism by claiming that social structure (institutional power, including media power) and social action (individual agency, including mediated interaction) are not diametrically opposed, but interact and overlap with each other.

Goffman: self-presentation

Goffman is probably the best-known theorist of social interaction. His inter-actionist theories, however, are mostly concerned with face-to-face (i.e. physically co-present) rather than mediated interactions. His analysis of everyday conversations is mostly restricted to one-to-one or group *gatherings* rather than, say, telephone conversations. Nonetheless, Goffman's work can be and has been applied to mediated forms of interaction in diverse ways, several examples of which are discussed later in this chapter. Moreover, in his later work Goffman shows a marked interest in how social interaction rituals are performed and reproduced across the media of radio, television and advertising. Two of these later works we will examine in detail - *Gender Advertisements* (1979) and *Forms of Talk* (1981) - but first we must understand Goffman's theory of **self-presentation**, which informs these later works and is widely referred to across several disciplines (sociology, anthropology, literary studies and social psychology as well as media, communication and cultural studies).

Goffman's self-presentation thesis is first outlined in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (first published in 1959). By self-presentation, Goffman means the techniques deployed by individuals and groups to perform an expression of themselves to others. This expression is usually intended to form a favourable and amicable impression - it is human nature, after all, to be liked as well as wanting to like. Moreover, 'When an individual or

performer plays the same part to the same audience on different occasions, a social relationship is likely to arise' (Goffman 1990: 27). The key word here is 'performer'. Goffman's model for understanding everyday social interactions is the theatrical stage. His is a dramaturgical theory of interactionism. Human beings are therefore analogous to 'real' actors, which implies that they are highly skilled agents of interaction and communication. This implication is warranted, and Goffman's interactionist perspective affords far more autonomy and power to individuals than do behaviourist or structuralist theories. As well as individual performers, there are self-presentational 'teams': 'if performers are concerned with maintaining a line they will select as teammates those who can be trusted to perform properly' (Goffman 1990: 95). Team roles are allocated to individuals, usually by a team director who oversees the smooth running of the performance. An example of a 'team' in this sense would be public relations executives who work with individuals and companies to manage their media performances (i.e. their public reputation). Promotion and crisis management are akin to what Goffman (1990) calls the arts of impression management. These days, PR is essential for anyone or anything on the public stage and in the public eye. However, individuals and teams can only control *expressions* of themselves through self-presentation techniques - *impressions,* on the other hand, may be managed but are never entirely controlled. As he states famously, 'Performers can stop giving expressions but cannot stop giving them off' (Goffman 1990: 111).

Given this state of affairs, Goffman divides the stage-managed regions within which self-presentation is performed into two parts: 'front' and 'back'. An individual's front refers to their capacity - through appearance, manner and social setting - to control the way in which they present themselves to others. Front is 'the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his [sic] performance' (Goffman 1990: 32). It should be noted from this quote that one's front region is not always *consciously* performed and controlled because its expressions are often taken-for-granted. For example, thanking someone for saving your life would be an intended expression of gratitude, while thanking a checkout operator for returning your change is more likely to be expressed unwittingly, as a routine social norm and rule of etiquette. By contrast, an individual's back is the region in which they withdraw from social performances and drop their front. Like the backstage region of a theatre, one's back is ideally concealed from view but always has the potential to be revealed in all its undesirable guises. An individual at a job interview, for example, can exhibit a favourable front (smart clothes, well-combed hair) that they have prepared in 'backstage' settings such as bathrooms, but find other facets of their back region behaviour (casual body language, stuttering speech) intruding on the situation when unprepared to answer that stickler of a question, 'WHY DO YOU WANT THIS JOB?'

How do front and back regions apply to media? To answer this question, we need to assess two of Goffman's more 'media-friendly' accounts of self-presentation. In both these accounts he argues that the dramaturgical character of everyday interactions is reproduced in, and accentuated by, media interactions. Performers on radio and television both represent and amplify certain social roles, norms and conventions familiar to their audiences. Goffman's first engagement with media forms of interaction is his analysis of radio and television talk, which he compares to that of 'ordinary talk' that is performed in physically co-present situations. Radio announcers in particular, by which he means 'live' announcers such as newsreaders or DJs, aim 'to produce the effect of a spontaneous, fluent flow of words - if not a forceful, pleasing personality - under conditions that lay speakers would be unable to manage' (Goffman 1981: 198). These media performers must adopt a front that accommodates the diversity of their audiences and avoids alienating or offending them: 'the audience must be addressed as though it were the public-at-large' (Goffman 1981: 242). However, radio and television announcers must work hard to conceal aspects of back region behaviour, given the multitude of people they must seek to please, who are also witnesses to their every word or action. Four kinds of speech faults are identified by Goffman as particularly applicable to radio talk: influencies (stutters or restarts), slips (incorrect phrasing or words being mixed up), boners (misinterpretation of words) and gaffes (unintended mistakes in choice of words or actions).

Goffman provides some examples of gaffes in radio talk. This from a BBC DJ: 'Here's an all time favourite made popular by the famous Miss Jessie Matthews several years back, *Dancing on the Ceiling.* This one surely deserves to be on every British Hit List' (cited in Goffman 1981: 250). Clearly had the DJ said 'every British Hit *Singles* List' his meaning could not have been radically misinterpreted to suggest that this particular crime of British culture should be targeted by the SAS. Here is another gaffe, following a technical fault in broadcasting: 'Announcer: Due to circumstances beyond our control, we bring you a recorded programme featuring the Beatles' (cited in Goffman 1981: 261). This is surely one of the few occasions when the Beatles have been effectively rendered second-rate, albeit unintentionally. At first, these gaffes might appear to be merely trivial asides and certainly not the stuff of grand theoretical ideas. However, what Goffman achieves in analysing these speech faults in radio talk is a sense of intimacy between producers (performers) and audiences that sows the seeds for a theoretical understanding of how production and reception practices interact with each other (see Scannell 1991; Tolson 2005, on media talk). Producers do not merely 'encode' their media productions according to institutional or professional codes (see discussion of Hall in Chapter 4), but do so in the service of assumptions they make about audiences. Radio announcers, for instance, broadcast 'self-constructed talk

projected under the demands, gaze, and responsiveness of listeners who aren't there' (Goffman 1981: 241), while audiences 'are not only personally offended by faults, but . . . actively seek out faults that might be offensive to someone' (Goffman 1981: 247). So although not physically able to interact, media producers and audiences encounter perceptions of each other - expressions and impressions - in dynamic interactions that construct what is produced, how and why it is produced.

This dynamic relationship between ordinary, 'real' actors and media performers or productions is evidenced in a second study by Goffman of gender representations in magazine advertisements. His notion of 'display' is akin to the 'front' and 'back' components of self-presentation. Displays 'establish the terms of contact, the mode or style or formula for the dealings that are to ensue between the persons providing the display and the persons perceiving it' (Goffman 1979: 1). Performers and audiences together construct the meanings enacted by a display, whether this occurs in face-to-face or mediated situations. Therefore, displays usually 'have a dialogic character of a statement-reply kind' (Goffman 1979: 1). This dialogue is a ritual feature of social interactions in both co-present and mediated situations. For example, photographic images of celebrities in public circulation - in the form of, say, advertising images - strike up a dynamic relationship with audiences in that these images constitute what it means to achieve success. As such,

> Celebrities not only link their own private lives to the public domain, but also can link the lives of private persons to it. For persons in the public eye ... seem to acquire as one of their powers the capacity to be a contagious high point.
>
> (Goffman 1979: 11)

This high point is what private individuals might aspire to. Body image is a clear example of how we interact with mediated celebrities. One author refers to 'countless images of idealized bodies' on television that 'serve as a common resource for judging the adequacy of self and others' (Glassner 1990: 215), and contribute to wider social interest in fitness and dieting. Being famous - already a social ritual indicating successful achievement - is reinforced by mediated displays of celebrity.

Moreover, mediated forms of display such as gender display in magazine ads tend to reproduce conventionalized images of interaction rituals in social life (i.e. the real world). Stereotypical gender roles are represented in order for the meanings of ads to be instantly recognized by audiences who are familiar with these social rituals on display. However, stereotypes *in themselves* are not the only significant techniques of gender display. As important are the con-struction of typical social situations, such as a man eating his meal while a woman does the cooking. It should be noted here that application of

Goffman's notion of gender display is limited to ads or other media that represent human figures in realist (i.e. real-like) situations. These realist - and gendered - situations invite audiences to witness and become involved in the conventionalized rituals being portrayed. Goffman refers to six con-ventionalized portrayals of gender display in ads:

1   *Relative size:* men in ads are usually bigger - both in terms of size and height - than women. While men are, on the whole, biologically bigger and taller than women, ads 'transform what would otherwise be a statistical tendency into a near certitude' (Goffman 1979: 28). In line with social rituals, taller and bigger figures tend to represent greater power than smaller and shorter ones. So men are usually seen in superior relation to women through relative size.

2   *The feminine touch:* this is typically represented as soft and gentle (a woman's hand caresses an object such as a perfume bottle) but the masculine touch is rarely depicted in ads - presumably lest, with all its masculine strength, it might break something!

3   *Function ranking:* in this portrayal a man 'is likely to perform the executive role' (Goffman 1979: 32) while a woman assists. For example, men usually drive cars while good-looking women assist in conversational exchange.

4   *The family:* this is usually depicted in ads according to a hierarchy which is governed by a combination of age and gender rituals. The father is usually the dominant figure in terms of size and position within the group, while the youngest daughter is usually the least noticeable and the lowest positioned.

5   *The ritualization of subordination:* acts of subordination in gender displays are usually performed by women in the service of men, or younger men in the service of their seniors. Women lie down on sofas, for example, while men stand behind them and aim sexually suggestive looks their way.

6   *Licensed withdrawal:* women more than men tend to find themselves withdrawn into situations in which they are solitary and appear vulnerable, and in which the 'absent man' - of whom the consumer may be implicated - is assumed to provide the missing protective role.

What Goffman argues in relation to these six conventionalized portrayals of gender display, then, is that they are not solely produced through media stereotyping but through a dynamic relationship between social (i.e. real) and constructed (i.e. mediated) interaction rituals. Moreover, meanings are not structured separately during the phases of production and reception - as structural Marxists like Hall might suppose - but in the interaction between

producers (those constructing displays) and audiences (who receive these displays in reference to social rituals). As such, there are neither media effects of the stimulus-response kind nor any ideological functions of media, but rather reconstructed media displays of 'standardization, exaggeration, and simplification that characterize rituals in general' (Goffman 1979: 84). So media such as ads represent a contrived version of social rituals, norms and conventions - like women being subordinate to men - that already exist in 'real', social situations. This is what Goffman calls 'hyper-ritualization', in which media tend to ritualize forms of interaction that are already rituals in the social world. In this sense, mediated interactions - and our interactions with media - merely reproduce, artificially, what we learn and recognize about our lives through face-to-face interactions. Interestingly, in the internet age, Goffman's discussion of hyper-ritualized mediated self-presentation has renewed resonance. However, internet-mediated interaction becomes an alternative to, rather than accentuation of, face-to-face interaction on profile websites such as MySpace. MySpace users perform their online profiles in intimate - almost immediate - interaction with other profiles, but as well as expanding opportunities for personal relationships such as internet dating (see Gibbs et al. 2006), profile websites provide spaces for carefully honed 'online fronts' to perform sinister self-presentations such as paedophilia.

Meyrowitz: *No Sense of Place*

Goffman's interactionist theory of self-presentation has been combined with McLuhan's medium theory (as discussed in Chapter 3) by Joshua Meyrowitz to formulate ideas about how media might affect social change. In *No Sense of Place* (1985), Meyrowitz argues that 'electronic media, especially television, have had a tremendous impact on Americans' sense of place' (Meyrowitz 1985: 308). While Goffman tends to think of social situations in physical places, Meyrowitz argues that television has brought different social situations in different physical places into a shared domain - that is, everyone's living rooms and the public eye. As he states, 'The telephone, radio and television make the boundaries of all social spaces more permeable' (Meyrowitz 1994: 67). This is very different from the impact of print media on society. Echoing McLuhan, Meyrowitz argues that print media such as books and newspapers have, historically, retained the link between social situations and a sense of place. Individuals who were highly literate could gain access to knowledge and information from which illiterate people were excluded. Moreover, skilled users of print media tended to build social networks with like-minded, intelligent others rather than with people who could not read or write. With the advent of television, telephone and radio, however, Meyrowitz claims that access to knowledge and information is shared by all,

regardless of literacy skills. So electronic media help to blur class, age and other social differences. For example, a modern-day child watching a television news bulletin can learn about sexually transmitted diseases. In the age of print media, that child would have had to be able to read as well as access the right books in order to learn about these 'adult' issues - information of this kind was far less easily *placed* then than now.

Meyrowitz (1985) draws on Goffman's notion of front and backstage behaviour to show how media can affect social situations and the social networks with which individuals identify. While print media have tended to segregate groups of people according to education and socio-economic class, electronic media tend to merge these groups together. For example, television viewers can be educated and informed in backstage settings such as their homes, and then use their new-found knowledge in front regions such as workplaces. According to Meyrowitz, the middle-class and the ghetto family inhabit the same social networks of information and knowledge, so their sense of physical separation - the fact that they live in different places - is insignificant compared to their sense of mediated togetherness. This is the basis for Meyrowitz's theory of **placelessness**, in which he proposes that people are no longer defined by physical boundaries or places (where we are) but rather by networks of information and knowledge (what we know) - facilitated by new media technologies - that have no sense of place. As such, television and other electronic media can be regarded as important resources for social and political change in pursuit of banishing social inequalities:

> it is not surprising that the widespread rejection of traditional child and adult, male and female, and leader and follower roles should have begun in the later 1960s among the first generation of Americans to have been exposed to television before learning to read.
>
> (Meyrowitz 1985: 309)

Unlike Bourdieu (as discussed in Chapter 9) who argues that cultural capital - what one knows through education and upbringing - is closely linked to socio-economic class, Meyrowitz's more radical argument is that electronic media have helped to transform their audience, whether rich or poor, into equally informed and educated citizens. Issues of technological, educational and social exclusion are strangely absent from Meyrowitz's argument, however, which is clearly problematic.

While front and back region behaviour are kept apart for beneficial ends in the case of social climbers among media audiences, those who perform in the public eye of electronic media find the maintenance of a front and its separation from backstage behaviour impossible to manage. There is simply no escape - no safe haven - from surveillance in the form of television cameras and microphones. Electronic media have led to back region

behaviour being witnessed by millions, as was the case when President Nixon underwent a very public trial during the Watergate scandals. Meyrowitz states: 'The disclosure of authorities' backstage behaviour leads to shock and public demand for increased attention to ethics and standards' (1985: 169). While ordinary people make their backstage an increasingly important region in which to develop effective front region behaviour in the electronic age, media personalities cannot avoid revealing some of their back region during the front they present in public life. Meyrowitz suggests that electronic media have changed the dynamics of public performances in such a way that a new type - what he calls 'middle-region behaviour' - has evolved. The watchful eye of television, for example, makes it almost impossible for public performers such as politicians and celebrities to separate their front (public) from their backstage (private) lives. So rather than the traditional theatre experience eluded to by Goffman, Meyrowitz suggests that media audiences adopt a side-stage view of performances in which they witness both front and backstage behaviours in public figures. By extension, in 'revealing previously backstage areas to audiences, television has served as an instrument of demystification' (Meyrowitz 1985: 309). Media personalities are forced to be more honest and publicly accountable about their private as well as their public lives;they are forced to practise what they preach ... and preach what they practise.

Horton and Wohl: personae and para-social interaction

An early account of mediated interaction by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl, 'Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction' (first published in 1956), derives from the Chicago School tradition of interactionist sociology along with Goffman's early work. Two important theoretical concepts are explored by Horton and Wohl which have had a significant bearing on subsequent theories of media production and reception. The first is what they call **para-social interaction**. Different but not dissimilar to ordinary social interaction of the face-to-face kind, para-social interaction refers to the *apparent* familiarity between media personalities and audiences that can be established through routine use of radio and television, particularly chat shows and other formats which include a studio audience. This familiarity can become a substitute for or may complement more traditional sources of familiarity, such as interactions between family members, relatives and friends. An 'illusion of intimacy' (Horton and Wohl 2004: 375) can be fostered in the performance features of these media, such as their conversational style and - in the case of television - the capacity to view close-up shots. Studio audiences also play an important function in coaching wider audience attitudes. A studio audience 'exemplifies to the home audience an

enthusiastic and ''correct'' response' (Horton and Wohl 2004: 377), such as when to laugh or cheer. Para-social interaction is perhaps at its most intense in television talent shows such as *American Idol* (2002-) and *The X-Factor* (2004-), in which heartthrobs sing while screaming fans (in the studio and, presumably, at home) pour out their emotion - and hold up banners or pick up phones to register their love and approval. Horton and Wohl tend to share the view of behaviourists that media have quite direct and powerful effects on audiences, although their value-free judgements on para-social interaction do not assume negative effects.

A second concept inextricably linked with para-social interaction is that of 'personae'. Personae are what Horton and Wohl call the personalities or performers that build up intimate, para-social relations with audiences via the media of radio and television. The important characteristic of personae is that they provide 'a continuing relationship' for audiences and that their 'character and pattern of action remain basically unchanged in a world of otherwise disturbing change' (Horton and Wohl 2004: 375). In this sense, para-social interactions with personae provide ordinary individuals with an escapist outlet away from the fears and uncertainties of a 'real world' subject to all the implications of modernity (see Chapter 3). Personae must work hard, though, in order to receive the affection and affiliation of a nation: 'Every attempt possible is made to strengthen the illusion of reciprocity and rapport in order to offset the inherent impersonality of the media themselves' (Horton and Wohl 2004: 378). Expert performances of self-presentation are the stimulus for para-social intimacy - not media technologies, as Meyrowitz and medium theorists might argue. Personae deploy various tricks and techniques, such as mingling with studio audiences, expressing feelings from 'the heart' in close-up, and mixing sincerity with comedy, so as to invite para-social relations with individuals whom they cannot see or hear. According to Horton and Wohl, these invitations are usually granted by individuals, particularly those who feel lonely or unloved due to unfortunate personal circumstances. It could be argued that this is hardly a convincing conception of the fallibility of media audiences. Moreover, Horton and Wohl's article can be criticized for making a crude distinction between social (i.e. real) and para-social (less real) interactions (Handleman 2003). As we shall encounter in Chapter 8, postmodern theory would reject such a distinction because media create new senses of reality that are divorced from traditional ones associated with face-to-face interaction. Having said this, Horton and Wohl's ideas have had a weighty bearing on later theories of celebrity and mediated interaction, including the work we will discuss next.