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## Social Identity Theory and Mass Communication Research

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Social identity theory (SIT: Tajfel & Turner, 1986) suggests that social group memberships constitute crucial elements of the self and that they combine with societal intergroup dynamics to influence thoughts and actions. Little research has linked SIT (or other intergroup theory) with mass communication research (cf. Husband, 1977; Mastro, 2003; Reid, Giles, & Abrams, 2004). Media research that considers intergroup processes has not been integrated into a coherent theory. We will illustrate the ways in which an intergroup approach illuminates mass communication processes at the individual and institutional level.

This chapter draws on three traditions. First, it incorporates a uses and gratifications (U&G) framework that claims that media consumers actively seek out messages that provide particular gratifications (Rosengren, Wenner, & Palmgreen, 1985). These gratifications tend to be conceived at the individual level (e.g., seeking entertainment, gathering information; Blumler, 1985). The attempts to examine broader social influences on gratification seeking have not become mainstays in the relevant literature (Blumler, 1985; Harwood, 1997; 1999a, 1999b; Johnstone, 1974; Katz, Gurevitch, & Haas, 1973; Roe, 1985), and when scholars have focused on identity, they have usually studied *personal* identity (e.g., Blumler, 1979; von Feilitzen, 1976; McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972). Our approach supports the U&G conceptualization of the media consumer as active; however, it takes the position that some gratifications can be usefully conceptualized at the *group* level.

One problem with U&G theory is its assumption that media use is

always related to gratifications. This fails to consider the fact that people who are dissatisfied with media messages might respond by creatively reinterpreting or “reading” the messages (Ang, 1995). Such issues have been explored by scholars in the British cultural studies perspective, which is the second main influence on this chapter. These scholars (e.g., Hebdige, 1981; Hodge & Tripp, 1986) examine how racial, ethnic, class, and gender groups oppose media messages from the dominant system, while creating their own style and identities (Kellner, 1995). According to Fiske (1987a), cultural studies research focuses on how subcultures resist and struggle with the dominant media’s hegemony. Hall’s (1980) encoding/decoding model argues that people interpret media messages in different ways, and group affiliations such as social class influence these interpretations. For those in the cultural studies tradition, audiences’ interpretations of messages reflect a negotiation between individuals and media texts.

Third, our chapter builds on content analytic work that has examined media portrayals of groups. This work has often been atheoretical, although some has been associated with traditions such as cultivation theory (e.g., Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1980). Herein, we provide a broader SIT-based justification of such work. We suggest that the intergroup arena provides good theoretical reasons for examining the quantity and quality of groups’ media portrayals, but that the theoretical rationale for such research has remained largely implicit to this point (Abrams, Eveland, & Giles, 2003; Harwood & Anderson, 2002).

The body of this chapter focuses on five propositions concerning the relationship between various media phenomena and intergroup processes. These provide different lenses through which to understand intergroup perspectives on the media. They are interrelated and symbiotic in that they consider processes that can occur simultaneously at different levels of the media production and consumption process.

### **Media Ownership and Content Are Important Elements of the Intergroup Environment**

This proposition encompasses issues of both *ownership* and *content* as central to an understanding of intergroup structural dynamics. First, we argue that control over media production and dissemination is a

crucial dimension of group vitality (see Harwood, Giles, & Palomares, this volume, and also below; Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977), and that media ownership and control can function as a means to support the subordination of disadvantaged groups. In the United States, recent discussion in the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and among political groups (e.g., the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People—NAACP; the National Organization for Women—NOW) has reflected the intensifying political battle over media ownership. While the FCC appears to be leaning toward consolidation, there is concern among those who advocate for the underrepresented that consolidation will reduce opportunities for different voices to be heard, particularly those of disadvantaged groups. NOW's president, Kim Gandy, recently commented:

Women and people of color already own less than five percent of broadcast media outlets... The new FCC rules threaten to shut out women and people of color from top-level participation in the media industry... the free marketplace of ideas will suffer as the already small number of independent voices in the media wither under concentrated ownership (NOW, 2003).

Numerous scholars have written extensively about American mainstream media as a vehicle of political manipulation. They argue that American media propagate the dominant class's hegemonic ideology in order to gain the consent of the subordinate classes to a system that perpetuates their subordination. This power is reflected in the media's concentrated and ethnically homogenous ownership (Jakubowicz, 1995) that does not allow them to function as a viable forum for advocating alternative political ideologies. Opposing viewpoints are covered only in alternative media with limited budgets and, hence, seldom get disseminated to wide audiences (Lull, 1995).

Clearly, battles over media ownership reflect broader concerns with group status in society, and are reflected in arguments concerning intergroup equity, as well as arguments about the link between ownership and content. From our perspective, media ownership is a crucial element of group *vitality* in terms of the specific status implications of holding positions of power (Giles et al., 1977). Hence, by applying SIT, we can see that studies of media ownership help us understand the underlying intergroup dynamic. Beyond ownership, the intergroup dynamic will also be revealed by examining the degree to

which groups are represented as creative talent, producers, management, and the like. The NAACP is particularly concerned with minority involvement in “green lighting” network television shows (i.e., approving shows for production: NAACP, 1999, 2000).

Studies of the impact of ownership and control are wide ranging. An extreme example of the power of ownership can be found in the use of media for promoting ethnic hate (e.g., racist individuals using media channels that they own to express and incite support for racism; Zickmund, 1997). According to Jakubowicz (1995), the hegemonic power of the dominant media in the United States has had serious consequences for Native Americans. Daley and James (1992) examined the introduction of television to rural Alaskan Native Americans in the 1980s. The Native American communities’ attempt at having their own indigenous television programming that would reflect and protect their culture and community was subordinated to the economic interests of the dominant commercially-driven media. Similarly, Henningham’s (1992) study revealed similar negative effects of media hegemony on Hawaiian Natives, including the destruction of the Hawaiian language. He notes that during the 1990s, commercial broadcasters dominated the media, and native Hawaiian cultural development was restricted to (little-watched) public access TV.

In addition to the ownership issues discussed above, media *content* also reflects important intergroup issues. First, much content analysis research examining the media presence of minority cultural groups, women, older adults, and the like has demonstrated that such groups are not receiving a “fair” portrayal (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Greenberg & Brand, 1994; Harwood & Anderson, 2001, 2002; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Roy & Harwood, 1997). Such studies compare the representation of particular groups in the television population with the “real” population to evaluate their degree of overrepresentation (for dominant groups) or under-representation (for marginalized groups). Recently, Abrams et al. (2003) and Harwood and Anderson (2002) have argued that the extent to which groups are represented on television is a fundamental element of their objective vitality (i.e., their group’s strength in the intergroup context). Part of the original conceptualization of the vitality construct concerned institutional representation (Giles et al., 1977), including the media.

The *quality* of group portrayals in the media is as important as

their quantity. This informs us about prevailing societal representations of groups and illustrates how cognitive representations of those groups might be perpetuated. For instance, Bird (1999) examines media images of Native Americans. She notes a shift over time toward less "savage" portrayals, but fundamentally unrealistic and demeaning depictions are still retained. Similarly, Merskin (2001) found that advertising almost always depicted American Indians in stereotypical ways. Such biased representation "denies that they are human beings, and presents them as existing only in the past and as single, monolithic Indians" (p. 167). Other similar work has examined the low levels of sexual activity in older adults on television (Harris & Feinberg, 1977), the lack of family involvement of African Americans (Harwood & Anderson, 2001), the over-coverage of criminal activity among Blacks and Latinos (Dixon & Linz, 2000) and the low employment status of women (Ferrante, Haynes, & Kingsley, 1988). Moreover, research findings consistently affirm that the American media represent African Americans in narrowly defined stereotypical roles (Dates & Barlow, 1990; Diamond, 1991; Matabane & Merritt, 1996).

Explanations for biased representations include a general ethnic blame discourse (Romer, Jamieson, & De Coteau, 1998), or biases based on unconscious stereotypes (e.g., Dixon & Linz, 2000). Indeed, such biases can be displayed in very subtle linguistic differentiations that almost certainly operate below the level of explicit control (Maass, Corvino, & Arcuri, 1994). From an SIT perspective, Husband (1977) notes that race and culture are rendered problematic by the ways in which White British reporters use linguistic terms in their coverage of ethnic and racial issues. Such findings illustrate group inequities, and, thus, content analytic work constitutes an effective way to map tolerance or prejudice concerning particular groups.

Beyond the presence and portrayal of groups, an intergroup focus forces consideration of *diversity* in media content. In the United States context, we might look at availability of TV offerings such as BET (Black Entertainment Television) and Spanish-language channels, newspapers published in languages other than the local dominant language, or culture-specific radio programming. The presence of these media indicates respect and tolerance for different groups and provides public support for those groups' vitalities. A diverse media environment can also reflexively influence other media (e.g., in the

United States, a successful Spanish language newspaper might drive an established English language paper to cater better to a Latino audience).

Finally, an intergroup perspective leads us to consider how media content reflects current intergroup dynamics. For instance, media styles often originate within particular groups and come to express the nature of that group and its identity (e.g., jazz or hip-hop for African Americans, punk for young people around 1978). When this occurs, outgroup influence and appropriation can be viewed as a threat and deliberately excluded. For instance, the distinction between authentic and inauthentic productions is crucial in the hip-hop community, and this distinction is drawn, in part, on whether the product emerges from the White or Black community. "Authenticity" can become a valuable marketing device, and can emerge as an attractive feature for the dominant group (e.g., Whites want to be seen listening to "authentic" hip hop, not an inauthentic imitation; McLeod, 1999; cf. Coupland, 2003). In turn, the original community of production might develop new forms or styles that maintain differentiation from the dominant group. For instance, a number of developments in jazz can be understood in terms of African American attempts to reclaim the music from Whites who were appropriating the music (e.g., moves away from traditional harmonic and melodic patterns; incorporation of African instruments and rhythms; Kofsky, 1970). The extent to which groups protect "their" cultural products from outgroup influence is an indication of the value of those products for their ingroup identities (Frith, 1981; Lull, 1987). Thus, the content of media represents important turf and identity battles between particular groups. It is clear that media content reflects group status and vitality (via the presence and nature of portrayals), conveys societal values concerning diversity (via the offerings available focused on specific groups), and serves as a barometer of intergroup relations.

### **Individuals' Group Identification Levels Influence Their Relationships with the Media**

In this section, we argue that group identification is central to media consumers' selection and cognitive processing of messages. We approach selection practices from a SIT perspective, focusing particularly on the ways in which media selection can constitute a social

creativity strategy for identity support. Tajfel and Turner (1986) outline a range of *social creativity* strategies, which are all ways to improve an individual's perceptions of the intergroup status quo without actually improving the position of the group within the hierarchy. Harwood (1997, 1999a, 1999b) describes social creativity in media selection by focusing on the role of social identification. This work builds on U&G theory by considering the ways in which group memberships structure the resources that individuals bring to their media interpretations and the gratifications they derive (e.g., Ang, 1996; Morley, 1992). Using experimental and survey methods, Harwood (1997) has demonstrated that individuals prefer shows featuring ingroup members, even when the content is controlled (an identical show is preferred if the star is an ingroup as opposed to an outgroup member). Viewing data support this contention, demonstrating that individuals consistently prefer to view shows featuring members of their own culture (Greenberg & Atkin, 1982), age (Harwood, 1997), and gender groups (von Feilitzen & Linne, 1975). Similarly, work has demonstrated that membership in the same social groups (e.g., gender groups) is crucial in determining children's personal identification with television characters (Cohen, 2001; Hoffner, 1996) and that ingroup characters are perceived as more similar to the self than outgroup characters (von Feilitzen & Linne, 1975; Greenberg, 1972; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Sprafkin & Liebert, 1978). Viewers also tend to select messages featuring values and attitudes consistent with their group memberships (Atkin, 1985).

In SIT terms, people are creatively dealing with the media in ways that make their *personal* viewing profile considerably more supportive of their group identity than it would be otherwise (see earlier discussion of the overall demographics of the television world). Perhaps most notable from this work is that gratifications grounded in group identification (e.g., "I watch television because I enjoy watching people who are like me") account for significant *unique* variance in television viewing and are empirically distinct from other gratifications (e.g., escape, information; Harwood, 1999a, 1999b). In other words, we have empirical grounds to claim that social identity influences media selection in ways that go beyond traditional U&G theory.

New technologies can enhance the ability to engage in social creativity strategies of identity-based selectivity. Gillespie (1989) has

shown the ways in which Asian Indians in Britain use video to show Indian media that are not available through traditional channels. Developments such as digital video recorders and digital cable make such selection even easier. An elaborated discussion of social creativity and the media is provided by Reid et al. (2004) who expand on the precursors to social creativity and also note the role that new media can play in such processes.

In addition to the selectivity issues above, viewers' social identifications also influence the ways in which they process and understand media. Audience analysis research has focused on different groups' radically different readings of media texts. Hall (1980) examined this phenomenon through his theory of "preferred reading," which suggests that audiences use three positions to decode media messages. The *dominant reading* is produced when an individual accepts the dominant ideology and interprets the media messages in line with the intentions of the writers and producers. Most audiences, however, read media messages by producing what Hall calls *negotiated readings*, which "accord the privileged position to the dominant definitions of events while reserving the right to make a more negotiated application to local conditions" (1980, p. 137). Third, *oppositional readings* occur when the individual understands the aims of the writer or producer but directly opposes the message. Here, the individual "retotalizes the message within some alternative framework of reference," which results in direct opposition to the dominant ideological message (p. 138). As argued by Morley (1992), social groups provide the resources and narratives within which individuals understand the media. The extent to which an individual identifies with a group will determine the extent to which that person processes media messages in group-related ways.

Radway (1984), for instance, describes the ways in which women's readings of romance novels function to support their gender identities, despite what might be construed as demeaning portrayals of women in the books (e.g., at the most basic level, these are books for women, by women, and primarily about women—the romantic hero is often a fairly peripheral character). Romance novels provide escape from the mundane patterns and pressures of daily life, and provide a way of reinterpreting women's roles in relationships (Radway, 1983). Similarly, Morley (1992) has shown that trade unionists question the

basic economic assumptions underlying a news story, whereas others are broadly accepting of those assumptions (see also Tate & Surlin, 1976; Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974). From a different (and more centrally intergroup) perspective, Mastro (2003) demonstrates ingroup-favoring interpretations of television portrayals of ethnic ingroups vs. outgroups. For instance, White respondents viewed criminal behavior by a Latino perpetrator in a television show as less justified than the same behavior by a White perpetrator.

Oppositional readings support group identity, but do not explicitly challenge the status quo (Tajfel & Turner, 1986)—they are not *social competition* in the original sense (Harwood et al., this volume). Radway (1984) makes this point very well:

Women's domestic role in patriarchal culture... is left virtually intact by her leisure-time withdrawal. Although in restoring a woman's depleted sense of self romance reading may constitute tacit recognition that the current arrangement of the sexes is not ideal for her emotional well-being, it does nothing to alter a woman's social situation, itself very likely characterized by those dissatisfying patterns. In fact, this activity may very well obviate the need or desire to demand satisfaction in the real world because it can be so successfully met in fantasy (p. 212).

In other words, Radway suggests that *social creativity* strategies in media consumption can satisfy the impulses that might otherwise find expression in a search for genuinely improved intergroup relations. In line with Ang (1996), we suggest that "audiences appropriate television in ways suitable to their situated practices of living... [but] that this appropriative power of the audience is the power of the weak... not to change or overturn imposed structures, but to negotiate the potentially oppressive effects of those structures where they cannot be overthrown, where they have to be lived with" (p. 8; see also Fiske, 1987b).

### **Media Content Influences Intergroup Cognitions**

First, media messages influence *identification* in a number of ways. This can occur most dramatically in the context of national events. Wars and international sporting events are often associated with ethnocentric media coverage which, in turn, is likely to result in enhanced nationalism for some (Horak, 2003). Pedic (1989) demonstrates that nationalistic appeals in advertising can protect the collective self-

esteem of individuals who identify strongly with their nation, and that nationalistic appeals are more effective for strongly identifying individuals (Pedic, 1989; Sloan, 1979). Gillespie's (1989) work indicates that immigrant Indian communities in Britain use video as a source of cultural connection to the past, as a means of maintaining identity, and as a tool to transmit cultural norms and language (i.e., identity) to younger generations. In the extreme, media organizations and politicians might manipulate information in order to maintain support for political leaders and the status quo (Giles et al., 1977; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972). This might be particularly likely when the dominant group perceives a threat to their position (Sachdev & Bourhis, 1985, 1991). For instance, US media coverage of the (first) Gulf War was constructed in ways that encouraged support for the war and discouraged dissent (Chomsky, 2002).

Second, media can influence intergroup *attitudes*. Branscombe and Wann (1994) demonstrated that exposure to a scene from *Rocky IV* in which Rocky loses to a Russian boxer results in high levels of derogation of Russians as a group—the media portrayal serves as an intergroup threat. Similar work has demonstrated correlations between sex-role attitudes and exposure to stereotypical television content (Ross, Anderson, & Wisocki, 1982). Kimball (1986) demonstrated that children's attitudes became significantly more sex-typed *after* the introduction of television to a previously television-free town. Similarly, experimental evidence shows that exposure to media featuring comic stereotypes of African Americans results in negative effects. Ford (1997) showed that White viewers of such material are likely to judge a Black target as more guilty of a crime than a White target (Ford, 1997). Similarly, Tan and Tan (1979) provide correlational evidence that exposure to stereotypical portrayals has harmful consequences for African Americans' self esteem. Husband (1977) has shown that the specifics of individuals' language use is influenced by the media—for instance, some of the precise words used in everyday conversations about immigration reflect those used in news reporting (van Dijk, 1987). In other words, the media can provide a means by which stereotypes are transmitted and perpetuated for majority and minority group members (Fryberg, 2003). Interestingly, some groups might be happy with inaccurate presentations and the ensuing effects. For instance, Perlmutter (2000) discusses the ways in which the police

might, at times, endorse and seek media images that downplay the duller aspects and play up the more exciting and sensationalist side of their work.

Third, group portrayals influence *perceptions of group vitality*. Television presence is an immediate element of objective group vitality (see earlier section). To this extent, given the relatively close links between objective and subjective vitality, the presence or absence of group members in media presentations (e.g., as TV characters) will influence *subjective group vitality* (Abrams et al., 2003; Bourhis, Giles, & Rosenthal, 1981). Abrams (2003) demonstrates that African American viewers who seek television to fulfill identity gratifications also experience elevated estimates of group vitality. Extensive viewing of shows featuring small numbers of older adults is also associated with reduced perceptions of older adults' demographic vitality (Gerbner et al., 1980). There is overlap here with the ideas presented earlier concerning objective vitality, however it is useful to distinguish, as the vitality literature does, between the objective macro-manifestations of objective vitality, and the micro-level subjective vitality representations.

Finally, the media influence perceptions of *cognitive alternatives* to the intergroup situation. Minority media might do this explicitly by encouraging social protest or pointing out and labeling injustices (Song, 1997). Mainstream media can provide such messages in a more subtle fashion. While programs such as *The Cosby Show* have been criticized as providing unrepresentative portrayals (Gates, 1989), they, nonetheless, provide examples of alternatives to the status quo (Innis & Feagin, 2002; Lewis, 1991). The *Cosbys* were respected members of their community, a world featuring upper-middle-class Black families. In effect, they illustrated an alternative way of being for the Black community (albeit one to which access might currently be blocked by prejudice). Interestingly, the show was criticized at times for being too "White" and, subsequently, the show incorporated more elements of Black culture (Gray, 1989). Likewise, Graves (1999) discusses the role of *Sesame Street* in modeling positive interracial relationships, and the power this has to change children's attitudes concerning such relationships. Hence, it is clear that media have the power to influence group identities, attitudes, perceptions of diversity, and perceptions of alternatives to the current intergroup status quo.

### **Group Processes Driven by Identification Influence the Media Environment**

In this section, we argue that identity-driven group processes influence established media organizations and also that those same processes influence creation of *new* media production organizations. A common media-related strategy of social competition is for interest groups to challenge dominant media to alter their content. For instance, the NAACP (1999, 2000) has criticized the lack of African Americans in primetime network programming. In a 1999 press release, the association accused the networks of a “whitewash” of primetime television, suggesting legal action to remedy the absence of African Americans in lead roles. Similar activities occur with regard to other levels in the media industry (e.g., campaigning for radio licenses to be granted to minorities; Napoli, 1999). Buxton (1991) describes complex negotiations between ACT UP (a prominent AIDS activist group) and TV production companies concerning a network drama’s AIDS story line. Buxton’s is a detailed account of the ways in which oppressed groups can engage in *social competition* with the mainstream media to resist negative, and encourage positive, portrayals.

The above strategies are focused on actions that might be taken by the minority or oppressed group. Dominant groups might also use these strategies when they experience threats to their position. As an example, Giles (personal communication, July 7, 2003) suggests that violent pornography, particularly that based on rape myths, might be in part a response to the growth of feminism. As women’s power in society grows and explicit discrimination against them becomes less acceptable, so men seek out more covert means of undermining the growing threat to their own dominance (for instance, by accentuating women’s supposed desire for that dominance). The growth of unapologetically right-wing news media in the United States (and more recent attempts to begin left-wing responses) might well be captured within a similar theoretical lens. Reid et al. (2004) describe similar processes, focusing on how media can facilitate social change.

An alternative to challenging established media for greater and improved portrayal is for groups to take control of media production. Thus, programming on BET (which was founded by Robert Johnson, an African American) is largely produced by and oriented toward a

Black audience. Access to such programming renders the quantity and quality of African Americans in broadcast programming less relevant and, hence, less of a source of an identity threat to African American audiences. Similar points can be made with regard to Spanish language television programming, ethnic newspapers, and the like. We treat this as a *social creativity* response to social inequity because it does not directly affect the status quo (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). However, these media have the capacity to undermine the power of mainstream media by taking audiences away. Also, they offer the potential to subvert dominant channels by criticizing them, and they can mobilize social competition beyond the media arena by publicizing and encouraging participation in protest or endorsing minority-friendly political candidates (Michaels, 1987). For instance, the Rodney King case in Los Angeles in the early 1990s was represented very differently in the African American vs. the mainstream media. The former challenged mainstream interpretations and educated their readers to be critical consumers of “facts” concerning the case and the subsequent riots (Song, 1997). Having an ingroup voice is not an end in itself, but provides an outlet for messages that challenge outgroup domination, question outgroup depictions of intergroup relations, and support activism by marginalized groups. It is important, however, to understand the complexity underlying some “ethnic” media. For instance, some prominent “minority” media networks in the United States are owned and operated by large mainstream conglomerates (Pearlstein, 2003). If these media become successful, they become targets for the big media conglomerates, and as a result, they can become part of the mainstream (e.g., Viacom’s acquisition of BET in 2000).

A different (and more local) approach to ingroup media production can be found in the garage band phenomenon. When groups of (generally) young males get together to write and perform their own music, this suggests a dissatisfaction with current media offerings and a desire to create something more original. Such bands often constitute the core of a broader subcultural construction of youth identity (Frith, 1981; Lull, 1987). The production of music as an expression of youth identity has received considerable attention (McQuail, 1997; Hebdige, 1981; Roe, 1992), although little from social identity scholars.

### Media Serve as the Locus for Group Identifications

At times, media become central to the development of group identities and, indeed, group identity can derive from a shared connection with specific media messages. As far back as 1969, Carey described a “centrifugal force” of the modern media environment. He argued that the increasingly specialized media environment has led to the formation of groups *defined by* media rather than national identity. That is, the act of viewing the same television show, visiting the same Web sites or listening to the same band can create a shared identity that, in turn, can influence existing intergroup dynamics and tensions.

Jenkins’ (1986) study of highly active *Star Trek* fans revealed the powerful influence of groups in understanding and appreciating this show. The fans, especially the females, published fantasy stories in newsletters and fanzines concerning the lives of the show’s characters, even developing their own “language.” These allowed the development of a distinctive group identity in spite of the fans’ geographical dispersion (Penley, 1997). According to Fiske (1987b), this kind of group activity helps “promote and circulate gossip within a community that is defined not geographically but by a commonality of taste, deriving from a shared social situation” (p. 80). Similarly, Hobson (1982) explored the way female audiences sought pleasure in watching the popular British television soap opera *Crossroads*. Her ethnographic research revealed that female viewers of the show applied norms and values to evaluate it based on conversations with other viewers. This kind of “group talk” helped the viewers to bring out the “meanings that ‘work’ for a particular audience group.... In this way, solitary viewing can be experienced as group viewing, because the viewer knows well that other members of her or his group are viewing at the same time” (Fiske, 1987b, p. 80). This is also a way in which the group can achieve a “collaborative reading” of the show—an interpretation that is grounded in the group and represents the group ideology.

These are examples of situations in which media messages united individuals and provided a locus for their group identification (Baym, 1999)—situations in which the media created novel groups that crossed traditional geographic boundaries (Carey, 1969). Additional research in this area might examine individuals who (literally) follow musical groups (e.g., “Deadheads”; followers of the band *Phish*), indi-

viduals playing online interactive computer games, or devotees of reality TV shows. In general, we feel there are some very useful links to be explored between work on *fandom* (e.g., Penley, 1997) and social identity processes (see also Leets, de Becker, & Giles, 1995).

### **Conclusion and Research Agenda**

First, research should examine portrayals on television shows popular among different groups. For instance, since elderly characters are portrayed less *frequently* in shows preferred by younger viewers (Harwood, 1997), it could be expected that elderly characters are portrayed more *negatively* in those same shows. Surprisingly, there is little work examining links between the nature of ingroup and outgroup portrayals and viewership data that would reveal viewers' group memberships. We know little about whether minority-owned media criticize the dominant media or encourage collective action against the dominant group. Indeed, we do not even know much about minority portrayals on "minority media" (e.g., are African Americans portrayed more positively on BET than other cable or broadcast networks?), or the extent to which minority viewers critically consume those images. Likewise, the relationship between consumption of minority media and social protest against the dominant group is unclear: Does minority media consumption result in social activism? Relatedly, research tends to focus on group portrayals as positive or negative, with an implied preference for the former. However, it is important to note that *diverse* portrayals of groups can be important for encouraging perceptions of group *variability* (which are crucially important: Harwood & Anderson, 2001; Hewstone & Hamberger, 2000). The availability of group portrayals that vary in significant ways from one another can also be valuable for *ingroup* members. For instance, Mares and Cantor (1992) demonstrate that lonely older adults prefer *negative* portrayals of the ingroup and feel better after viewing such portrayals (presumably because of the greater opportunity for achieving positive *individual level* comparisons with the media character in such situations).

Second, more examination of the *effects* of group portrayals is warranted, especially whether positive portrayals of ingroup members are associated with increased group identification (Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Mares & Cantor, 1992). Similarly, what are the conse-

quences for viewers who cannot access ingroup portrayals no matter how “selectively” they seek them (Harwood, 1997; Harwood & Anderson, 2002)? Given the limits to individuals’ capacity to creatively interpret texts (Condit, 1994), we might expect that people will seek alternative media (e.g., Gillespie, 1989) that are increasingly available via technologies such as video, satellite television, and the Internet (Mitra, 1997). Of course, some of those media are also making hate speech more accessible (Leets, 2001). Finally, the absolute extent to which media are important in influencing intergroup processes (relative to other forms of socialization) should be examined more carefully.

Third, intergroup media industry politics deserve more attention. Many constituencies exert pressure on producers with respect to group portrayals. The extent to which these campaigns are effective and the ways in which they are received within media organizations deserves more attention. How can social groups effectively campaign for more and better representation? To which appeals do media organizations respond positively?

We have presented a conceptual map with which media and intergroup scholars might approach the intersection of the two areas. At its broadest, this map deals with two levels: A macro-level of media ownership, objective indices of media content, and the societal manifestations of intergroup dynamics (e.g., objective vitality); and a micro-level of intergroup cognitions (subjective vitality, identity, group-related attitudes). These levels intersect at numerous points (e.g., content influencing attitudes, perceptions of ingroup underrepresentation leading to campaigns to change media ownership, etc.). Such a map is conceptually consistent and complementary with Reid et al.’s (2004) social identity model of media usage and effects. It attempts to cover a little more ground, and, in doing so, it remains somewhat more abstract than the Reid et al. model. However, the essence of both frameworks is the same: Individuals’ interactions with the media are often intergroup interactions and need to be considered as such.

Placing such a diverse array of media research into a social identity framework does a number of things. It provides a deeper understanding of the *social* (in the broad sense) functions of media. SIT integrates knowledge about individual viewing and processing, media

influence on intergroup relations, and group-related processes in media organizations. The chapter also illustrates that apparently unrelated literatures are operating in complementary ways. For instance, from an SIT perspective, industry-level examinations of media ownership are quite closely related to individual examinations of viewing gratifications in that both focus on understanding the ways in which intergroup dynamics are played out in the media context. Likewise, SIT provides some insight on Hall's notions of negotiated and oppositional readings, demonstrating that even *oppositional* readings might not always be strategies aimed at social change. The SIT approach reveals how mass media serve as a locus of group struggle (Hall, 1980; Fiske, 1987b; Kellner, 1995). While entertainment remains the most common reason for media use, group memberships and identifications influence the ways in which people process and react to media messages, and provide a foundation for examining such issues in the changing media environment of the future.

In closing, we return to the three strands of work from which this chapter derives. Work in cultural studies has set the stage for the understanding of audiences' careful and multiple interpretations of texts, and the role that group memberships (particularly class and gender) play in those interpretations. However, the epistemological orientation of cultural studies is largely inconsistent with that of SIT. Our chapter has more metatheoretical commonality with U&G, which describes an active, interpretive audience whose activity is somewhat predictable based on measurable predispositions. Finally, this chapter provides a theoretical framework for previous content analytic work. The quantity and quality of media portrayals can now be conceived as a crucial element in understanding intergroup dynamics concerning vitality (Abrams et al., 2003). That said, audiences are not consuming a television diet that resembles the results of these content analyses. Rather, viewing patterns are influenced by group memberships and identifications. Indeed, to return to the fundamental goal of this chapter, we have illustrated that understanding the process of mass communication, from creation to consumption, is aided by taking an intergroup perspective.

#### **Author Note**

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