



# Articulation

**Related concepts:** *capitalism, criticism/critique, culture, encoding/decoding, hegemony, ideology, technological determinism.*

‘Articulation’ might be thought of as a conceptual ‘Holy Grail’ in media studies. It is one of the most difficult and elusive terms addressed by this book. This entry relies more than others on familiarity with some of the other key concepts. As the concept has also been much misunderstood, we have dealt with it in greater detail.

Variants of its usage share a common broad purpose: to account for the relationship between ‘**media**’ and their social context without reducing one to the other. There have been two linked ‘waves’ of application of the term in media and communications:

- in the work of Stuart Hall and Birmingham cultural studies (and its revival within critical **discourse** analysis)
- in the more recent British ‘domestication school’.

The shift between these two is indicative of shifts of emphasis within media studies. Broadly, the first addresses mediated **cultural forms**, the second new media technologies.

## INFORMING FRENCH DEVELOPMENTS

As with many other relatively recently developed concepts in media and communication studies, articulation was borrowed from work in structuralist linguistics. In its first application to non-linguistic phenomena – in anthropology – it goes under another name, ‘homology’. The structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss applied techniques developed by Roman Jakobson in Prague for the analysis of language to kinship systems and myths. Lévi-Strauss ‘decoded’ myths held by indigenous peoples by finding patterns of repetition of key elements. Crucially, he looked to these recurrent structures or forms rather than the ‘content’ of the myths. From these he derived two sets of binary oppositions (or ‘differences’). For example, in Lévi-Strauss’ (1973: 149) interpretation of the resemblance by association the Nuer people recognize between twins and birds, he says, ‘It is not the resemblances but the differences which resemble each other’. That is, the resemblance is not to be found superficially in the semantic *content* of ‘twins’ or ‘birds’ but in the *form* – in the system of differentiation within which ‘twins’ and ‘birds’ are positioned (Lévi-Strauss, 1973: 153):

Twins ‘are birds’, not because they are confused with them or because they look like them, but because twins, in relation to other men, are as ‘persons of the above’ are to ‘persons of the below’, as ‘birds of the below’ are to ‘birds of the above’.



Such analyses of homologous relations were usually represented diagrammatically with colons thus:

Birds of the below : birds of the above :: persons of the below : persons of the above

Lévi-Strauss offered this model as a solution to the Marxian dilemma of ‘vulgar reflectionist’ accounts of the relationship between ideas and their social sources (the base and superstructure metaphor – see **capitalism**). Rather than look at content, as many Marxist analysts had, they should look at ‘the structure’, that people thought through such structural relations, rather than overt content, Lévi-Strauss suggested. This form of relationship is variously known as ‘structural’, ‘homologous’, ‘formal correspondence’ or, eventually, ‘articulation’. Many disputed Lévi-Strauss’ extraction of these binary oppositions from the myths. This was in part because an evident power relation existed between researcher and those researched. Lévi-Strauss deemed the believers of myth incapable of consciously changing it, just as Ferdinand de Saussure deemed users of language (see **sign**). Rather, for both Saussure and Lévi-Strauss, changes in the structure were effected by the collective weight of usage/mythmaking. Crucially, for Lévi-Strauss, each myth was a ‘bricolage’ or assemblage of elements of previous myths that were changed in response to the need for an account of changed social circumstances, such as a loss of territory to another group. This implicitly political relationship between researcher/researched was central to Stuart Hall’s adoption of the model.

While Roland Barthes took up the term mythology for his **sign**-based early analysis of **ideology**, Pierre Bourdieu and Louis Althusser took up Lévi-Strauss’ implication that homologous analysis could be extended to modern societies. Althusser made a tentative step towards resolving the base-and-superstructure impasse from a structuralist perspective by altering the topography of the metaphor to one of ‘levels’. He introduced ‘articulation’ when applying the classic structural linguistic model of a combination of linguistic elements formed from synchronic and diachronic axes to a whole society (‘social formation’) instead of a language. A given society is thus ‘structured like a language’ in that it is the product of the combination/articulation of different levels – economic, political, ideological – that are ‘relatively autonomous’ from one another, with the economic level determining all ‘in the last instance’. Althusser found a warrant for this position in one of Karl Marx’s methodological texts on production and consumption, a position that initially drew Hall to the concept (Althusser, 1982; Hall, 1974a; Marx, 1973b). Any gains Althusser made for media analysis, however, were undermined by the reductive formulation of **ideologies** as ‘ideological state apparatuses’ or ISAs (Althusser, 1971).

Althusser’s colleague, Nicos Poulantzas, developed this use of articulation further in relation to ‘the political’ level, coupling it with a closer reading of Antonio Gramsci. It is Poulantzas who is usually credited with renaming Gramsci’s ‘historical bloc’ – the combination of classes and class-fractions who ‘rule’ and so dominate the state and seek **hegemony** within civil society – as a ‘power bloc’ (Poulantzas, 1976: 296ff.), a term picked up by both Hall and Fiske as well as many others in cultural studies.

Pierre Bourdieu set his strongly class-based sociology of education and culture against the structuralist project – and especially semiology – but, nonetheless, developed his own form of homologous analysis that owed much to Lévi-Strauss (Bourdieu, 1991). Where Lévi-Strauss had established his first pair of binary oppositions speculatively, Bourdieu usually took institutionally given binaries – such as two-party political systems – as his starting point. Later, he expanded this model into what has become known as his theory of *fields*. Fields are understood as realms of relatively autonomous political or intellectual practice. Bourdieu’s homologues posit resemblances between distributions of power – ‘the rules of the game’ – usually across two distinct and otherwise discrete fields and often in the form of binary oppositions. Bourdieu (2005) conducted most of his own research on fields of ‘cultural production’ and, towards the end of his life, applied this model directly to ‘the journalistic field’.

### HALL AND LACLAU

Hall, too, had sought a solution to the problem of base and superstructure and, like Gramsci, had been drawn to Marx’s ‘*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*’ (1950b) as a possible solution.

Like Raymond Williams, Hall identified in Marx’s own practice an important variant of the use of the base and superstructure metaphor that did not merely reduce the political and ideological to the economic, as orthodox Marxism had done, but recognized something approaching ‘relative autonomy’ within the superstructures. In brief, Marx argues that political and literary ‘representatives’ of social classes work within different ‘theatres’ but, nonetheless, reproduce the ‘limits in thought’ of the classes they represent (see **ideology** and **hegemony**). In a series of essays, Hall (1977a, 1977b, 1977c) tracked this issue from Marx to Gramsci and Althusser and, finally, to Bourdieu’s field model (Hall, 1978).

Significantly, in these methodological papers, Hall (1977b: 45) identifies Marx’s method in ‘*The Brumaire*’ with homology and generally holds on to this term until he discusses Bourdieu’s ‘mutual articulation of two discontinuous fields’ (1978: 29). What is common to both of these uses for Hall (1977b: 58) is the notion of ‘double movement’ or, as Bourdieu (1991: 169) calls it, ‘double determination’. In Hall’s routine usage, this expression becomes famously ‘double articulation’.

By now, hopefully, the intent of all these models is becoming clearer and the need for Hall’s ‘double’ qualification more evident. If one realm of practice – for our purposes, say, journalism – is to be linked *systemically* with another – say, politics – then the ‘rules’ of each ‘game’ need to be comprehended first. The ‘players’ operate according to the logic of their respective ‘fields’ – and, yet, so the argument goes, these fields tend to reproduce similarly *structured* internal power dynamics. Moreover, the consequences of such homologues/articulations have implications beyond the immediate fields – indeed, for the distribution of power within the whole society. As Hall

(1978: 29) paraphrases Bourdieu's conception of 'symbolic power' in relation to 'the field of class relations':

Symbolic relations are not disguised metaphors for class relations. It is *because* they do symbolic work of a certain kind, that they can function as the articulation of another field – the field of class relations: and hence do the work of power and domination.

Characteristically, Hall had been working with such a model 'in practice' before he fully theorized it. As early as his 1972 essay on news photographs, he had argued for a 'double articulation' of two levels of analysis – in that instance, between 'neutral news values' and the connotative resonances of news photos (Hall, 1972: 75). In 1976, however, he (and colleagues) conducted a very Bourdieu-like analysis of the professional **encoding** of the BBC's flagship current affairs programme *Panorama*. Here, two 'discontinuous fields', in Bourdieu's sense, were painstakingly analysed: the parliamentary theatre of party politics and the 'rules' of BBC current affairs, especially interviewing, as retrieved – consistent with the **encoding/decoding model** – by semiotic analysis. Broadcast current affairs is shown to be *not* susceptible to conspiratorial charges of 'bias'. Rather, it is precisely its limited autonomy – including its norms of balance and objectivity – that demonstrates the homologous relation Hall proposes. This can be characterized by the following 'Lévi-Straussian' model:

State : political sphere :: political sphere : media.

Thus:

Some such interpretation suggests that the relationship of the media to the political is remarkably *homologous* to the *general* relationship between politics and the State itself, in which politics (party practices) accords to the State (the institutions of power such as Parliament and the Courts) a certain measure of independence and neutrality, because this appearance is, ultimately, the most effective way in which politics can use or make itself effective *through* the State, without appearing directly to do so in the defense of narrow or short-term [c]lass or Party advantage ... This is the sense in which both Gramsci and Poulantzas speak of the State as necessarily a 'relatively independent' structure. It is by the displacement of class power through the 'neutral and independent' structures of the State, that the State comes to provide the critical function, for the dominant classes, of securing power and interest at the same time as it wins legitimacy and consent. It is, in Gramsci's terms, the 'organizer of hegemony'. If, then, we consider the media in homologous terms, we can see that they, too, do some service to maintenance of hegemony, precisely by providing a 'relatively independent' and neutral sphere ... And this reproduction is accomplished, not in spite of the rules of objectivity (i.e. by 'covert or overt bias') but precisely by holding fast to the communicative forms of objectivity, neutrality, impartiality and balance. (Hall et al., 1976: 88)

It was this dimension of Hall's work that shared common ground with that of the political theorist Ernesto Laclau, who had provided the most significant contribution

to the advancement of the concept of articulation, initially within Poulantzas' framework. Laclau did not, however, write about media and communications directly. His primary interest was in political regimes such as fascism and, especially, in the political phenomenon of **populism** – a theme later picked up by Hall in his work on authoritarian **populism**.

Laclau explicitly proposed articulation as an alternative to economic reductivism to account for the relationship between social classes, politics and ideologies. Like Hall, Laclau drew heavily on Gramsci's conception of **hegemony**. In particular, he elaborated the mechanisms involved in the development of the ideology of a ruling bloc that seeks to become hegemonic. So, rather than reduction, Laclau developed Gramsci's key hegemonic mechanism of *incorporation* in effect, as (primarily linguistic/ideological) *articulation*. Laclau argued that incorporation required the articulation of elements outside the organic ideology of the dominant bloc into a new combination.

His primary example of incorporation was the modifications that liberalism had to make to its commitment to free market principles in the nineteenth century in the wake of open class struggles over wage rates and child labour (Laclau, 1977: 161–2). However, the reorganization of free market principles towards regulatory ones in the wake of the 2008 'meltdown' of financial markets would serve just as well. In each case, the central ideological task is to incorporate elements of critics' and opponents' arguments so that fundamental contradictions – as basic as whether or not child labour or financial market regulation should be a feature of capitalism – are presented as mere differences and so ideological continuity is maintained. Crucially for Laclau, it is this new articulation – as in 'it is crucial to maintain financial market stability at all costs so that people do not lose jobs', for example – that seeks to ideologically interpellate not only the general population but also members of the power bloc itself.

To put this in purely theoretical language, ideologies are thought of as consisting of separable 'elements' that can be recombined in different ways into, for the later Laclau, **discourses**.

Laclau's emphasis on hegemonic success being dependent on the articulation of dispersed elements joined neatly with Hall's established fascination with Gramsci's reflections on *common sense*. Common sense gives us a more familiar formulation of just what it is that is being 'articulated'. We all have a ready understanding of the term – which appears to have an equivalent in most languages – usually because someone in authority has told us we lack it. This very familiar experience is perhaps the most ubiquitous act of 'interpellation'. Most of us have been 'hailed' by the invocation that in lacking common sense, we lack an adequate everyday understanding of the way the world 'really is'. This is what Laclau would later call an 'empty signifier', completely amenable to all forms of (re)articulation.

If we start, as Hall often does (1985a, 1996b, for example), with Gramsci's metaphor of 'an infinity of traces without ... an inventory' (Gramsci, 1976: 324), then we can think of common sense as a repository of elements that have no internal coherence, something like the way all proverbs seem to have contradicting partners. *This* dimension of articulation for Hall refers to the combination and linking of elements of common sense with a particular ideological element.

Crucially, Hall follows Laclau's specification that the internal relationship between these elements is not 'logical' but 'connotative' (Laclau, 1977: 10) – such articulatory combinations operate as chains of association rather than 'rational argument'.

The role of the media from this perspective, then, is primarily framed, for Hall (1977a), by the process of articulation of the dominant ideology in the power bloc's quest for hegemony. It is, however, only framed – not 'determined' – as the whole purpose in developing this concept is the avoidance of economic reductivism.

So what has happened to the 'double movement'? In a now famous metaphor provided in a 1986 interview, Hall compared his understanding of mediated ideological articulation with the ambiguity in the British use of the term articulation to mean both 'to utter' and to connect – as in 'articulated lorry', which is a truck consisting of a driver's cabin and separable trailer: 'Either the cabin or trailer can exist separately – they don't necessarily have to go together' (1996c: 140). This articulation is, thus, still 'double', as it was for Hall in 1972. It refers to both (in its 'utter' sense) the contingent constitution of an ideological discourse from dispersed elements (including common sense) *and* the linkage that 'matters' for Hall (1996c: 141), 'between that articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected'.

Later, Hall and Laclau differed significantly, following Laclau's shift towards a Foucaultian conception of **discourse**, which was not easily compatible with Hall's 'lorry' version of articulation (Hall, 1996c: 147–8; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Instead, Hall, like some later critical **discourse** analysts, developed his model of **discourse** from Vološinov's emphasis on semiotic contestation (Hall, 1982: 79–83, 1985a; see **sign**).

Laclau's 'logical/connotative' distinction also echoes the primary distinction Barthes makes between denotation and connotation in his definition of code (see **sign**). So this conceptual repertoire is remarkably similar to the one Hall had already developed in his work on **encoding/decoding**. In effect, if we accept the Althusserian model of 'levels' – as Hall and Laclau usually do – then the media need to be seen as a fourth 'level' with their own conditions of relative autonomy (contra Althusser's ISAs but closer to Bourdieu's fields).

### THE DOMESTICATION SCHOOL AND ITS 'DOUBLE ARTICULATION'

The version of 'double articulation' developed by Roger Silverstone and his colleagues dates from a later period in media studies: broadly the mid-1990s to the present (Livingstone, 2007a). The simplest contrast with a Hall/Laclau usage would be to suggest that its starting assumption is the centrality of the media and mediation in everyday life, rather than a politically focused Gramscian political agenda. By the 1990s, the research focus had shifted from politics and ideology to consumption and meaning. This shift should not be overemphasized, however.

Yet, within cultural studies itself, articulation was reformulated within a revised **encoding/decoding** model of a circuit of cultural production and meaning that was the conceptual centrepiece of an influential series of Open University textbooks (du Gay et al., 1997). The career of David Morley is indicative here. While his early

work was central to the empirical application of the **encoding/decoding** analyses of mediated meaning within the wider frame of Hall's conception of articulation, his subsequent research has increasingly addressed the 'domestication' of new media technologies themselves. As Morley and Silverstone put it in an early version of this position, media are considered both 'texts and technologies', the meanings of which are emergent properties located within, but not determined by, micro-social environments in which their use is 'domesticated' – most notably within households. Crucially, for Morley and Silverstone (1990: 33), 'acts of consumption (of both texts and technologies) provide the articulating dimension'. In this sense, the domestication school's use of the same phrase, (double) articulation, actually addresses an issue related to but distinct from Hall's earlier formulation – that is, the interplay between media as technologies and media as cultural forms played out in other conceptual contests covered in this book (**medium, cultural form**). To connect the domestication school's understanding with Laclau/Hall's concern with politics and economy may well require a 'triple' (Hartmann, 2006) or even 'quadruple' articulation – or a multilayered Bourdieuan field approach.

#### FURTHER READING

The key texts by Hall and Bourdieu are cited within this entry. A more recent application of Hall's 'double articulation', mixed with the domestication school approach, can be found in Shaun Moores (2000). Laclau's project on developing a general theory of populism – from much the same conceptual framework as his earlier work – has continued (Laclau, 2005, for example). David Morley (2000) is indicative of his later work on domestication (especially Chapter 5). Robin Mansell and Roger Silverstone (1996) is a representative collection of the domestication approach included within a range of studies of information and communication technologies (ICT). Thomas Berker et al. (2006) provides a recent 'updating' of the domestication framework.

## Audience

**Related concepts:** *broadcasting, culture industry, image, influence, mass, media effects, modern, popular, public sphere.*

The sense of the term 'audience' that has traditionally concerned communications and media studies is that of the **mass** audience.

At a minimum, the mass audience is typically defined as the indeterminate group(s) to which mass communications are addressed. The membership of such