

**AN EXAMINATION OF THE VALUE OF THE CONCEPT OF THE
“SEMIOSPHERE” IN THE STUDY OF MASS COMMUNICATION: TESTING THE
VALUE AND FEASIBILITY OF A PROPOSED RESEARCH PROJECT**

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Abstract

The article is based on a paper presented at the 10th World Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies in collaboration with the International Communicology Institute, La Coruña, Spain, 22-26 September 2009. The article is a preliminary treatment of an investigation of Yuri Lotman’s concept of the “semiosphere” as a meta-theory for future semiotic media analysis. In consecutive parts the author deals with research questions, provides a brief introduction to media semiotics and gives a brief summary of some of the characteristics of the new (postmodern) society and the new media landscape brought about by the development of information and communication technology - all of which necessitates a reinterpretation of theory and semiotic analysis. The article briefly introduces the so-called postmodern paradigm in media research with reference to chaos and practice theory. The author outlines what, according to him, are some of the shortcomings of media semiotics. Finally he explores some of the characteristics of Lotman’s semiosphere and suggests ways of how it could be applied to media analysis.

Keywords

semiotics, semiosphere, Yuri Lotman, media semiotics, social semiotics postmodernism, chaos theory, practice theory, new media landscape, new society

Introduction

This article should be read as a research plan for a more expanded research project in 2010 and 2011 as part of the author's research sabbatical. In the context of postmodern media theory it is argued that information and communication technology together with globalization have brought about a new media environment characterized by diversity and pluralism, but also duplication and fragmentation. Technological developments have brought about media convergence, blurring traditional distinctions between different kinds of media and media genres. It has also brought about unprecedented interactivity and interconnectivity between communicator and recipient (media users). All this has initiated the need to revisit mass communication theory related to the media as a social, political, economic and cultural institution, theory related to media content and forms of analysis, and theory related to media audiences.

Despite all these changes a constant factor remains the media's phenomenological nature to produce and disseminate (abundant and redundant) meaning(s) and through this to create a "semiosphere" of meaning. The purpose of the proposed research project is to investigate the concept of "the semiosphere" (as developed by Yuri Lotman [1984(2005)]) as a possible meta-theory in mass communication research and a critique of the media as the dominant form of symbolic expression in contemporary society. This will be done by means of an investigation of how and to what extent the media can be seen, described, experienced and critiqued from a semiotic perspective as a semiosphere of meaning in

- contemporary mass communication theory (especially postmodern theory and so-called radical mass communication theory)
- contemporary discourses about journalism as representation and the crisis of journalism
- contemporary discourses about media content from the perspectives of social semiotics and the analyses of the media as metaphor

Based on an exploration of this, the project seeks to postulate that the binding factor in the study and research of the (new) media and new media environment (as part of the science of communication) should be to emphasize the media's semiotic role as the producer and disseminator of meaning(s), and the semiosphere of meaning created by this. Evidently,

questions such as the following about the quality of this semiosphere (if not its banality) will be raised.

- What are the characteristics or features of the semiosphere as described by Lotman and how could they be applied to the media?
- How do you deal with the four main segments of traditional media studies in the analysis of the media as a semiosphere, namely the media as an institution (media sociology), media production, media content and media audiences?

It ought to be emphasized that the article is based on a paper presented at the 10th World Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies in collaboration with the International Communicology Institute, La Coruña, Spain, 22-26 September 2009. This article is a preliminary treatment of the topic on which the author intends to and is in the process of expanding on in additional articles published in relevant journals. Full bibliographical references to and acknowledgements of the work of key and seminal figures in media semiotics such as Roman Jakobson, Ferdinand de Saussure, John Fiske, John Hartley, Stuart Hall, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Daniel Chandler, Pierre Bourdieu, Jean Baudrillard and others, are given and dealt with in earlier work of the author (see e.g. Fourie, 1982; 1995; 1996; 2001, 2007; 2008; 2009).

Media semiotics

Media semiotics has a long history. In the tradition of de Saussure's structuralist semiotics and Roman Jakobson's theory of sign functions there are many examples of semiotic analyses of media texts focusing on, in the case of written or printed texts, mainly the arbitrary sign and in the case of the visual media mainly on the iconic, indexical and metaphorical nature of these texts. There are many examples of various kinds of codes operational in media texts, beginning with clear distinctions between codes of form and codes of content and moving on from there to the analyses of codes of behavior, analogue and digital codes, presentational and representational codes, elaborated and restricted codes, and logical, aesthetic and social codes (see e.g. Fourie, 2009: 57-62).

Key figures in the world of media semiotics such as Roland Barthes, Althusser, Foucault, Bourdieu and Stuart Hall (with his encoding/decoding theory) have had a huge bearing on media semiotics and have, to a large extent, dictated and dominated the analyses of the media as an ideological construct. When it comes to probably one of the most prominent topics in critical media research, namely the inherent ideological nature of the media, the work of structuralist and post-structuralist theorists such as Roland Barthes and his emphasis on the production and nature of social myths (as represented in and by media content), Louis Althusser's examination of the media as part of "state apparatuses" to sustain dominant ideology through stereotypical and framed representations, and Foucault's work on the ideological nature of discourse and discourses as ideological representations, are seminal.

In the critical study of journalism and although not "pure" semiotics but in the tradition of semiotic thinking, Pierre Bourdieu's (Bourdieu, 1998) theory of "*habitus*" and "*symbolic capital*" has given new momentum to the critical analyses of journalistic practices as being codified and as such structural limitations that conceal truth². From the cultural studies approach (never associated with an agreed methodology (see Hartley, 2008:42)³ but always on the edge of semiotics with its emphasis on meaning and meaning creation) came, in media studies, an emphasis on the ideological role of language in mediated communication, in other words a linguistic interest in, for instance journalism as a language, the journalistic use of language, journalism as discourse, and the discourse analysis of the media's treatment of topics. The above are only a few examples of how media studies have been dealing with semiotics.

However, globalization and with it radical changes to the very nature of contemporary society which, according to sociologists Anthony Giddens (see e.g. 1990) and Manuel Castells (see e.g. 1998) are experienced almost universally, together with the immense impact of increased and ever changing information and communication technology, which brought about, almost universally, a new media landscape characterized by media convergence, overturned many of the traditional formalist, structuralist and/or poststructuralist semiotic applications to the media.

Before Lotman's theory of the semiosphere is introduced as a possible way for the future of media semiotics and the description of the media as a universe of mediated meanings, a brief description of some of the main characteristics of this new society brought about by

globalization and the new media landscape is needed. A motivation for this is that media, and mediated communication or mass communication should always be understood in terms of the context in which the media functions and communicates. This context is society itself.

The new society and new media landscape

As far as the new media landscape is concerned it is a reality that new ICTs such as satellite communications, the computer, the internet and its various applications, digital technologies, broadband and mobile telephony, to name a few, together with new approaches to regulation and ownership initiated by economic trends such as marketization including the privatization and liberalization of media markets, brought about almost a completely new media landscape. For the purpose of this paper some of the main characteristics of this landscape can be summarized as being:

- new distribution platforms giving rise to a multi-media approach: for example, radio via internet/ print on the internet/film, television on the internet, internet, television, radio and video on mobile phones, and so
- an increased and huge diversity and choice between print titles, broadcasting offerings, in short, the concept of pluralism and diversity gained new meaning(s) in the new media landscape
- a high level, not known before, of interactivity between communicators and users (audiences) : for example talk shows, blogs, phone-in programs, etcetera
- the convergence of public and private media: for example the previous clear distinction between three main types of national broadcasting systems, namely a core public service system, a core private system, or a core state system started to merge into a single system made up of a mix of public, private and other types of broadcasters in which public service broadcasting may still play a significant, but no longer dominant role
- as far as content is concerned, there is a blurring of media genres, for example ‘infotainment’ which makes it increasingly difficult to elevate so-called ‘high-journalism’ from popular/tabloid journalism with an increased use of sound and

image bites; a mix between formats with magazines and newspapers imitating the look of television and television adopting characteristics of the internet

- changed audiences and niche markets which closely relate to and reflect the changed nature of contemporary societies

As far as the new society is concerned, some of the outstanding characteristics affecting the media and thus mass communication as a phenomenon are the existence of a new kind of public characterized by hybridization, fragmentation and the rise of minorities. It is a society in which the traditional distinction between public and private is blurred (cf. e.g. Jacka, 2003; Brants, 1998, Ang, 1998).

Given different kinds of social movements, new and different kinds of grassroots organizations and different kinds of communities (real and virtual), public interest as such, in other words, what it is, has changed and is even more difficult to define than before. It is increasingly difficult for the media to claim that they serve the public interest or to use the construct of the “public interest” and/or “public opinion” in their defense. Whose public interest whose public opinion?

As far as the media’s role in society is concerned, the changed society calls for a new conceptualization of the public sphere. This is a conceptualization different from Habermas’ (see e.g. 1984;1989) ideal public sphere, one in which it is recognized that a single public sphere with a common normative dimension seldom exists, and that it is difficult to recognize a coherent population with shared values.

Another prominent characteristic of the new society is a new kind of democracy that exists. Various scholars agree that the idea of the ideal republican democracy, be it representative and/or participatory/communitarian democracy, is in a crisis in the sense that in today’s globalized postmodern society democracy can no longer be viewed as an fixed ideal type, but only as something that is fluid and evolving due to the fact that the nature of citizenship itself has changed.

It is characteristics of the new society and the new media landscape such as the above which, in mass communication and media studies, gave lead to the so-called postmodern paradigm

in which, old theories related to the role, functions and uses of the media (which have directed research in the dominant positivist and critical paradigms) are fundamentally questioned and under revision. The postmodern paradigm, obviously also raises questions about the applicability of “old” semiotic theory, concepts and constructs to media analysis.

In the next part a brief summary of some of the basic tenets of the postmodern paradigm is given.

The postmodern paradigm

In the postmodern paradigm (see e.g. Crowley and Mitchell, 1995: 171-233) is argued that given the characteristics of the new society, in which diversity and pluralism are accentuated, and to which the media plays up to, the media have become so big, so varied, so omnipresent that it can no longer be described meaningfully or comprehensively in terms of old theories and philosophies. The media have become a culture in and for itself pretending to mirror or represent reality but actually producing a reality which is at the same time a false reality or simply a simulacrum of reality.

Given this situation it should be acknowledged that much of our mass communication theory and especially normative media theory grew out of the context of Western industrialization and was/is according to postmodern scholars a political act of power perpetrated in the name of “the public’s interest”. Much of it is about the power to legitimize media ownership, regulation and to direct or misdirect dominating thinking about the media and its so-called role in democracy and the role of the media and freedom of expression in democracy.

Given the postmodern society and media landscape we need to move beyond our old theories of cultivation, effects, uses and gratification and reception, all of which in one or another way have been concerned with power and ideology. The very nature of power and ideology has changed in the new society and media landscape. The old theories and their tenets have frozen arguments about the media in closed discourses by emphasizing, for example, the difference between libertarian vs. authoritarian media systems, the dichotomies in regulation vs. open market, cultural vs. economic primacy, people-centeredness vs. market-centeredness, quality vs. quantity, public vs. private, rationality vs. subjectivity and emotion, and so on.

Positivist and critical mass communication theory are based on outmoded models of mass communication and assumptions related to limited supply, homogenous content, passive audiences, and linear transmission models. These models and assumptions are no longer adequate to describe the current postmodern society and media landscape (see e.g. Ang, 1998).

In short, the postmodern perspective concludes that the revision of especially normative media theory (and thus all theory and research about the role, functions and uses of the media, be it related to research about media production, media content or media audiences), should be based on the acknowledgment that in the new society and new media environment there can be no objective, a priori assumption about exactly what media performance needs to be assessed, what ‘good’ media performance’ might be, or what may count as ‘in the public interest’. It needs to be acknowledged that the complexity of normative theory lies in the inherent dichotomy between freedom of expression and measures to control it (cf. Jacka, 2003; Ang, 1998; Brants, 1998). Furthermore, the complexity roots in the fact that finding answers as to how the media is supposed to behave in a specific society are rooted in world views, each with their own ideologies and ethics (see e.g. Gunaratne, 2005).

New theory

A number of new theories stand in the sign of the postmodern paradigm. Two which I want to highlight here are Brian McNair’s “chaos theory” and Nick Couldry’s “practice theory” (both which can, to a certain extent, be associated with Bourdieu’s ideas about *habitus* and the *actor-network theory*).

Brian McNair’s *chaos theory*

The British communication scientist Brian McNair (2005) and a growing number of younger scholars, believe that given the new society and the new media landscape beliefs and theories about the media as an ideological instrument in support of elite and power dominance to the detriment and exploitation of the masses can be questioned (ibid: 155).

Given the pluralism and diversity of the new media environment (both in terms of ownership, content and audiences) today’s mainstream media (not even taking into account alternative

and civil media) are highly critical of elites, be it politicians, industrialists, etcetera. The mainstream media are tending increasingly to the disruptive, the subversive and iconoclastic in their relationship to power, functioning “whether deliberately or not as unwitting transmitters of news, analysis and commentary that embraces and connects the national, transnational and global spheres of public discourse, with unpredictable and largely uncontrollable outcomes.

This is what McNair calls the *chaos theory*. The theory assumes that, in contemporary conditions, independence and autonomy (of the media –PJF) are the default positions of the media with respect to power in advanced capitalism, and that successful control of the media by elites increasingly represents not the norm but the deviation, a state of relative control, which has to be worked for through the application of public relations techniques (spin), direct censorship and ‘flak’ (ibid: 156).

The roots of the *chaos theory* are changed views about and the practice of democracy. The changed views were brought about by, amongst other things, the evolvment of political cultures characterized by public debate through mediated access in the form of, amongst others, non-elite participation on radio phone-ins, talk shows, studio debates, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, You Tube, and so on. The context of the chaos theory is the changed media technology and media convergence, changed media economics, and not least, changed ideologies (post-Reaganism, post-Thatcherism, post-communism, post-apartheid, post-September 11 (McNair, 2005: 156 – 161). All this necessitate a radical revision of media theory and old beliefs about the power or not of the media and about the nature of media content, media audiences and media culture in general. It should be accepted that whatever we say about media content and media audiences are speculative and no content and/or audience analysis can be conclusive.

Nick Couldry’s *practice theory*

Related to the above is Nick Couldry’s (2004) *practice theory*. In the context of the postmodern paradigm the theory is closely linked to new and emerging debates in sociology over “practice”⁴. His theory aims to move beyond the old debates about media effects, political economy, the ideological nature of the media, active vs. passive audiences theories, etcetera⁵. Instead he seeks to focus our attention on the media as practice in life, in society, in

the world, and how the media as a practice (practice in the sense of tradition, habit, custom, routine) *anchors* and *organize* other human practices and experiences. And this is where his theory becomes rather relevant for the description of the media as a semiosphere of meaning.

Couldry argues that media research should start not with media texts or media institutions, *but with what people are practically doing with media* and what the media are practically doing with people across a whole range of situations and contexts⁶. The practice theory wants to answer questions⁷ such as the following:

- What does it mean, or what it is like, to live in a media-saturated world?
- What does it mean to live in a society dominated by large scale media institutions?
- What does the concept “mediation” really means?
- What are the role of media practices and the product of media practices (images, representations, patters of discourse) in ordering (in the sense of instructing and directing) other practices across the social world? (Couldry 2004:23)

To answer these questions, Couldry argues, future research should need to take in the whole range of practices in which media consumption and media-related talk is embedded. If we say or argue that we live in a media saturated world, then how, for instance, have the media penetrated, perpetrated, infiltrated, for instance, education (not only in the content of syllabi in the sense of introducing media studies as a subject but how teachers and students use the media to make sense of interpret and understand daily life, history, science, sex, and the world)? How have the media invaded, direct and determine social discourses about, for instance politics, crime, sex, love, and the family? How are the media behind and even determine police practices, political marketing, lobbying, campaigning, sport, (sport administration, management and practice, e.g. for instance the role of television in the administration and management of sport events). How have talk shows (not the text or what is being said) but the phenomenon of the talk shows permeated social life and social discourse?

It seems, and it can be argued that with this new emphasis on the permeating, omnipresent and anchoring role of the media in contemporary life, as suggested in both the chaos and

practice theories, that we are back to what this author (Fourie, 1984) suggested in his professorial inaugural lecture, namely the study and research of mass communication as ritual and as rhetoric, which returns us, in terms of communication philosophy to the study of the media as a semiotic construct in the semiosphere of *interactive, inter-subjective, inter-textual* meanings spread over the vast array of media formats and media genres that characterize the present universal media landscape.

The shortcomings of traditional media semiotics

From the perspective of the postmodern paradigm it is argued that (traditional) semiotics cannot penetrate the totality of mediated communication and/or mediated texts. As Laughey (2007:59) argues in relation to, for example, Roland Barthes ... “the need to ‘stretch one’s imagination” when identifying media mythologies point to a weakness with semiotics as a method and the structuralist theory it informs. Far from a science, semiotics is a highly subjective method of reading social and cultural myths that depends entirely on the analytical brilliance of the semiotician” (quoting Couldry, 2000:75). Moreover, as well as being unable to account for historical changes in language and myth, given its focus on synchronicity, semiotics is only able to analyze one particular text in isolation. What Nick Couldry calls the ‘total textual environment’ (Couldry, 2000:73) – the multitude of media texts and technologies that we interact with on a daily basis – cannot be penetrated by semiotic analysis....” and... “Semiotics, given that it can only ever be one person’s interpretation of what they read, hear or see, is certainly not a substitute for empirical (content and or) audience research” (Laughey, (2007:59).

When it gets to the *audience* (reader/recipient/subject) scholars such as Stuart Hall (1973) has endeavored to address this semiotic shortcoming in media analysis and studies with his semiotic approach in which the emphasis is on the encoding and decoding of ideology and hegemony. Again, Laughey (2007:60-59) shows how numerous forms of media and audience analysis, for instance within the paradigm of cultivation analyses and uses and gratifications theories, have tried to explain media and sense-making but could not succeed in explaining the media’s *overall role* in the *social production* of meaning. The same applies to Hall’s encoding/decoding model. Although Hall leaves room for different semiotic interpretations by different recipients, his focus remains on the production of ideology or ideological

meanings and cannot be extended to the role of the media *in the sense-making processes of daily existence*.

Newcomb, Hartley, Fiske and social semiotics

Evidence of media studies and more specifically media semiotics moving beyond its traditional focus on the formalistic description of signs and codes in media texts to a recognition of the more general role of the media in the social production of meaning can be found in the work of Horace M. Newcomb (1984), John Hartley (1999), and John Fiske (1987). They were among the first, although mainly in the field of television to recognize the need for an understanding of the universe of mediated meanings. Newcomb did it with reference to the work of Bakhtin and Hartley to the work of Lotman.

Newcomb (1984) was concerned about the inability of media and cultural studies to define (analyze) the relations between mediated texts and social practice. He argued “that neither formalist (semiotic) analysis nor “effect studies” adequately account for the link between television and social signification. As a solution he referred to Bakhtin who focused our attention on the link between communication *processes* and the struggle for meaning in mediated texts. He saw Bakhtin’s dialogic theory as applied to the analysis of the novel as a model for mass media analysis where dialogic utterances meet dialogic reception. On the basis of this Newcomb, chose to examine television as an example of a dialogic medium, emphasizing amongst other things, dialogue within genres, in production process, and in the viewers’ power to change the channel and, by so doing, creating a dialogue between channels. Newcomb was ultimately interested in the question of how all these dialogic aspects of media relate to dominant ideologies (Newcomb 1984:45). Is the dialogue real and potent for actual change, or is it contained? (See Akhterov, 2009.)

Hartley, with reference to television and television as part of postmodern culture argued that “all understanding [of television - PJF] is ‘traditional’, not ‘personal’ – the work of human thinking is done collectively and impersonally, not by ‘you and me’ as individual persons, but by semiotic systems (of which television is one – PJF] which are both widespread (synchronic) and long-lasting (diachronic)” (Hartley, 1999: 60). He then goes on to relate this view to Yuri Lotman’s argument that “the individual human intellect does not have a monopoly in the work of thinking. Semiotic systems, both separately and together in the

integrated unity of the semiosphere, both synchronically and in all the depths of historical memory carry out intellectual operations, preserve, rework and increase the store of information” (Lotman, 1990: 273).

With his emphasis on the polysemic nature of television and on intertextuality, Fiske (1987) emphasized the multiple meanings of the television text. In the context of post-structuralism he placed a focus on the different meanings a text could have for different people and on not only the explicit but also the implicit meanings and often unintended information on values, attitudes, modes of behaviour and so on, of a text. With intertextuality he explicitly focused the attention on the meaning of the televisual text in relation to other television texts (intertextuality within the medium). By so doing, he emphasized one of the main tenets of postmodernism and he started to hint at the existence of a semiosphere of meaning within television.

In the most recent application of semiotics to the media, as it is done in social semiotics (see e.g. Fourie, 2009:71-75) the emphasis is on how a subject (the viewer/reader/listener) produces meaning - a meaning that is not at all the stable relationship between a signifier and a signified presumed by De Saussure. What *fixes* meaning, is the punctuation of the signifying chain by the *action of the subject* - in other words, how the media user (the subject) subscribes meaning to a media text. Secondly the *power of the text* (content and form) to determine the subject's response is emphasized. Thirdly, social semiotics applied to media emphasizes the risk of formalist semiotics becoming an obstacle rather than the road to the analysis of the text's ideological functioning. To circumvent this danger, a conception of communication and media as a *specific signifying practice* is proposed. *Signifying* indicates the recognition of media as a system or series of systems of meaning - of media as an articulation of an aspect of reality. The term *practice* entails that a medium (such as television, or a radio station, or a newspaper or the internet) is not a neutral medium transmitting a pre-given ideology, but is the active producer of meaning. The term also carries the further implication that, since media produces meanings, the question of the positioning of the spectator enters into the analysis of media.

With questions such as:

- How do mainstream media contribute to maintaining the existing social structure? and

- What is the appropriate form for an alternative media that will break the ideological hold of mainstream media and transform media from a commodity to an instrument for social change?

social semiotics can be fully situated within the realm of critical media theory as practiced in media studies, its main point of reference being Althusser's ideological theory (see e.g. Fourie, 2007:132-133). As such, and thus as a specific signifying practice, media is now (in social semiotics) not only studied in terms of *langue* and *parole* but also of *discourse*, thereby implying a subject. Under such a conception, media is furthermore viewed as one of a number of "machines" generating ideology and as a work of *semiosis*, in other words, a work that produces effects of meaning and perception, self-images and subject positions for all those involved, communicators and recipients.

With the above as some of the main tenets of social semiotics, Chandler (2008) formulates, for instance, the following as some of the questions raised in social semiotics - questions that can in the framework of social semiotics, be raised in a semiotic analysis of media texts:

- What does a purely structural (formalist) analysis of the text downplay or ignore?
- Who created the sign?
- Whose realities does the text represent and whose does it exclude?
- For whom was the text intended?

With these questions, we are back to the basics of Barthes' (1977) semiology and his emphasis on social myth and the *obtuse meaning* of a text (or the subjective additional "quality" we attach to a signifier). Although moving beyond the structuralist and formalist analysis of texts, the emphasis in social semiotics' application to media, however, remains on the role of the recipient of media messages (as was emphasized in post-structuralism (Derrida/Kristeva)), the media as ideology, and, although recognizing intertextuality and discourse, mainly still focus on the individual media text (or group of texts in the same genre).

Yuri Lotman and the semiosphere of meaning

The basic purpose of this article's proposed research about Lotman will be to investigate how Lotman, notwithstanding the above developments in media semiotics, provides a framework for the study of the media and media texts not in isolation but as part of a system consisting out of various media and various media genres from various mediums and the relationships between these media and genres in the construction of what this author prefers to call a *mediapshere* of meaning within the semiosphere of meaning.

The intention is to investigate and seek to apply the following basic tenets and fundamental concepts of Lotman to the media system (i.e. the totality of all the media in a country (the country's media system) such as radio, television, print, internet, new media applications such as Facebook and Twitter, mobile telephony whether in the context of or practiced as public, private or community media.

One of the main reasons for doing this, is to redress the kind of claims that a television or a radio program or a newspaper story or groups or series of programs, stories, etcetera, does this or that, for example, contribute or do not contribute to nation building, strengthens a stereotyped representation, frame someone or something, place on the public agenda selected topics, but without taking into account the *totality of media messages* and meanings conveyed by the media system as a whole about a specific topic, person, organization, etcetera. In essence the research will thus question theories about the ideological role of the media related to agenda setting, framing and stereotype theory in support of McNair and Couldry's chaos and practice theories. Put in another way, the author would seek to emphasize the role and concept of *narrative accrual* or the accrual of meaning in a media system's construction of a *mediasphere* within the semiosphere of meaning.

Characteristics of the semiosphere

First, an attempt will be made to apply and rework Lotman's definition of the semiosphere (applied by Lotman to literature) to the media as a system of meaning that could be called the *mediasphere*. In an analogy to Vernadsky's "biosphere" as a space, filled with living matter, Lotman's "semiosphere" can be defined as a space filled with systems of meaning. An analogous approach to semiotic questions is also possible. The semiotic universe may be

regarded as the totality of individual texts ... as they relate to each other. In this case, all structures will look as if they are constructed out of individual bricks. However, it is more useful to establish a contrasting view: all semiotic space may be regarded as a unified mechanism (if not organism). In this case primacy does not lie in one or another sign, but in the “greater system”, namely the semiosphere. The semiosphere is that same semiotic space, outside of which semiosis itself cannot exist. (Lotman, 2005:208.)

“Just as, by sticking together individual steaks, we don’t obtain a calf, but by cutting up a calf, we may obtain steaks, - in summarizing separate semiotics acts (texts – PJF) we don’t obtain a semiotic universe. On the contrary, only the existence of such a universe - the semiosphere – makes the specific signatory act real. The semiosphere is [thus] characterized by a range of attributes.”

Some of the main attributes which the author will seek to apply to the media system are:

Context: Lotman (2005:206) warned that one should always remember that clear and functionally mono-semantic systems (symbolic forms of expression such as the media or a medium of a media product - PJF) do not exist in isolation. “Their articulation is conditioned by heuristic necessity. They function only by being immersed in a specific semiotic continuum, which is filled with multi-variant semiotic models situated at a range of hierarchical levels. Such a continuum (by analogy with the concept of “biosphere”), we call the semiosphere.

Interconnectedness and interdependence: Lotman (2005: 218-219) emphasized that the interconnectedness and interdependence of the different components of the semiosphere for their meaning should be dealt with: “...the ensemble of semiotic formations precedes (not heuristically but functionally) the singular isolated language (or sign system such as the media or a medium) and becomes a condition for the existence of the latter. In other words, and applied to the media, it should be taken into account how newspapers, for instance, are a condition for radio, the internet, television in terms of deriving their meanings from each other and building on each other. This opens for new interpretations old theories about the media’s production of meaning and audience’s understandings thereof and uses of the media to make sense of the world.

Without the semiosphere, Lotman argued, language (as a sign system, and one can argue television, for instance, as a sign system) does not function. In terms of meaning, it actually does not exist. The different substructures of the semiosphere are linked in their interaction and cannot function without the support of each other. In the same way it can be shown how different media rely on each other for the production of meaning or a meaning about a topic and on each other in and for the process(es) of narrative accrual.

The characteristic of interconnectedness and interdependence closely relate to the matter and theory of *intertextuality* and *inter-subjectivity*. Lotman refers to this as the law of mirror symmetry and as a basic structural principle of the internal organization of meaning-making constructions (Lotman, 2005:225).

Dialogue and the centrality of dialogue in the semiosphere: There is a dialogue between the different parts/components/systems making up the totality of the semiosphere. “The presence of two similar but simultaneously different partners in communication is one of the most important, but not the only conditions in which dialogic systems originate. Dialogue includes within itself a reciprocity and mutuality in the exchange of information”...and... “Since all levels of the semiosphere (life/human personality/texts/media/culture/science) are an interconnected group of semiospheres, each of them is simultaneously both participant in the dialogue (as part of the semiosphere) and the space of the dialogue (the semiosphere as a whole)”. (Lotman, 2005: 216; 225.) As far as dialogue is concerned, the wealth of research and theory about media as dialogue will be employed in the research project. (See in this regard, for instance, the work of Akhterov (2009) in which he deals with Bakhtin’s dialogic theory.)

Other characteristics of Lotman’s semiosphere that will be investigated, especially against the background of the global character of the media and the nature of the new electronic media and their impact on time and space, are the following:

Diachronic depth: The semiosphere has a diachronic depth since it is allotted by virtue of a complex memory system without which it cannot function. The mechanism of *memory* occurs not only in individual semiotic sub-structures, but also in the semiosphere as a whole. At different historical moments in the development of the semiosphere, one or other aspect may dominate, suppressing or fully neutralizing the other. (Lotman, 2005:219.)

Time and space: The structural irregularity of the internal organization of the semiosphere is determined, in part, by the fact that having a heterogeneous nature, the semiosphere develops at different speeds and in different places. (Lotman, 2005:215.)

Diversity: There is always an increase in the *diversity* of the elements (substructures) of the semiosphere. As is argued in the postmodern paradigm in media research, diversity and pluralism is probably the most prominent characteristic of the new media landscape.

Global character: The semiosphere has a *global character*. Lotman drew attention to the impact of cultures and their literatures on each other in terms of meaning. In the media, obviously the impact of the global media on the nature of the media as a mediasphere and in the semiosphere of meaning in a country would have to be recognized in a semiotic analysis of a country's media system.

How to analyze the semiosphere

Lotman (De Jong, 2008: 120-141) was one of the first structuralist researchers who offered a more detailed description of codes and who showed that it is not a single code which ought to be the focus of our attention, but several codes. It thus seems as if the analyses of codes, but then in terms of a description of Lotman's understanding of codes, may be an appropriate way to start analyzing the semiosphere (or in our case the *mediasphere*) of meaning. As Lotman did in the case of literature, this author's proposed research will seek to begin with an application of Lotman's distinction between the following codes as described by De Jong (2008) but as they apply to the media system:

Intratextual code: Codes which are internal to the text(s) of particular mediums and how they govern the formal features and content of a specific medium and eventually text(s) in the medium.

Intertextual code: Codes which relate particular medium codes to the corpus of media codes of the same type.

Extratextual code: Codes which relate media codes to the cultural, social and political environment, that is to specific cultural and social conventions, beliefs, knowledge, historical data and the like.

Intratextual, extratextual and intertextual codes work together to form relationships within the media system. It is these relationships which guide our attempts to produce meaning. Lotman (2005:134) also distinguishes the following concepts to explain “interruptions” in the codes and their interrelations that may affect our processes of meaning-making:

Minus device: a point at which the pattern (or convention) a reader (media user) expects to be continued, is broken

Meaning saturation: when elements in a literary work or then in a media system are determined by more than one code at one and the same time to signify the same thing. In media we can look at the principle of repetition (in program scheduling, cross-over(s) in different media, news on the hour), created by various means in various mediums (media) in various ways and at the problem of redundancy or what Lotman refers to in the case of literature as “semantic saturation” – all contributing to what is known in postmodern media criticism as the media being redundant, uncontrollable, immeasurable, a hyperreality and a simulacrum (see e.g. Baudrillard, 1983).

Criticism against Lotman

In the application of Lotman to the media and in an effort to develop a theory of the media (and a specific country’s media) as a mediasphere of meaning within a broader semiosphere of meaning, note should, however, be taken of the criticism that Lotman did not account for different interpretations by different readers and how different readers may use different codes to understand and interpret literature. The same may apply to the media. Here one will have to take into account Stuart Hall’s foundational work (1973) and those works that followed from his work on this topic.

Furthermore, note should be taken of Lotman’s own warning, namely: “If we depart from the premise that the subject of semiotics is any object (Lotman 2005: 206) which acts as a means of linguistic description (the description of any process or system of signification – PJF)

....then we adhere to the well-known rule of scientific thinking: the movement from the simple to the complex – implicitly justifying oneself at the first opportunity. However, in this there is also the danger that heuristic⁸ expediency (the convenience of analysis) comes to be accepted as the ontological character of the object, which is assigned to it by the structure derived from the simple and clearly outlined atomistic elements, in accordance with their complexity. The complex object is thus reduced to the totality of the simple.”

The analysis of the media as a semiosphere should not be seen as a convenience of analysis – to the contrary, it will be a complex analysis. However, Lotman’s theory of semiosphere may contribute to a meta-theory for the analyses of mediated communication and it may be a beginning towards the description of what Couldry (2004) misses in media analysis, namely an understanding of how the media anchors modern man’s existence in terms of his/her meaning-making of the world.

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² With *habitus* is meant that journalists (and researchers) take certain practices and conditions as being natural, objective, as being a social institution (the way "we" do things). But are they? What are the alternatives? Bourdieu saw *habitus* as being *structural limitations* that conceal truth. Those with power (such as for instance journalists and media owners) dictate and conceal *habitus* and own what Bourdieu calls *symbolic power*. In exercising their power they commit *symbolic violence*. The task of analysis should be to expose *habitus* and *symbolic power* and for journalism research to find alternatives to the ways in which things are being done in journalism practice.

³ As far as methodology is concerned, "...the cultural approach is not associated with agreed methodology. Because of its heterogeneous and interdisciplinary nature, one of its distinctive features over the years has been "reflexivity", which in brief means recognizing the position of the investigator both politically and as a knowing subject. Indeed, it is an interventionist form of analysis; its proponents want to change the world, not merely to understand it; many of its writers seek to produce activists" (Hartley, 2008: 42).

⁴ A 'practice'-based research paradigm is emerging in sociology with the purpose to overcome the old theoretical division between structure and agency (see e.g. the work of Bourdieu, 1977). Practice theory focuses: (i) not on ideas and meanings but on practices related to a no inject itself, and specifically routine activities (rather than consciously chosen actions) notable for their unconscious, automatic, un-thought character (Swidler 2001), (ii) discourse, which is not what anyone says, but the system of meanings that allows them to say anything at all.

⁵ Couldry distinguishes five (old) paradigms: The US (Merton/Lazersfeld, Katz's) mass communication effects paradigm in the tradition of experimental social sciences; the critical Marxist paradigm (Benjamin/Adorno) – focusing on media and power/ media and ideology. Also on the text and the institution – emphasis is on processes of commoditisation; semiotic analysis, applying structuralist/poststructuralist literary theory and methods of text analysis to media texts – the emphasis is on the polysemy of the text; critical research focusing on audiences (Hall, Morley, Ang) with a stronger empirical tradition than the earlier Marxist criticism – the emphasis is on the processes of interpretation; anthropological research into media - the emphasis is on the open-ended practices of media production, circulation and consumption. In between there are cross currents.

⁶ Initial work in this regard was done by Kuhn (1970), Silverstone (1994, Hirsch (1992) and I would like to add the work by Horace Newcomb (in the 1980s who focussed our attention on, for instance, the broader meanings of television as dialogue. According to Couldry, the focus, however, remained in these works on the media in the home, or the home as the primary site of media consumption (use) and understanding.

⁷ These questions link up with recent anthropological research into media processes free from a primary attachment to studying texts and their interpretations (see e.g. work of Ginsburg, Larkin and Abu-Lughod, 2002) (see Couldry 2004: 8 – 9).

⁸ For the sake of clarity, "*Heuristic* is an adjective for experience-based techniques that help in problem solving, learning and discovery. A heuristic method is particularly used to rapidly come to a solution that is hoped to be close to the best possible answer, or 'optimal solution'. Heuristics are "rules of thumb", educated guesses, intuitive judgments or simply common sense. *Heuristics* as a noun is another name for heuristic methods. In more precise terms, heuristics stand for strategies using readily accessible, though loosely applicable, information to control problem solving in human beings and machines" –Wikipedia).