

Reader report on Tereza Pavlíčková's PhD thesis, entitled

The Understood Author: A hermeneutical exploration of audiences' interpretation of author as a productive practices behind a text

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I have read the final version of Tereza Pavlíčková's thesis with pleasure. For this report I have compared the two versions and used my comments on the draft version for the small defense. I find the thesis much improved and more readable because of better signposting (via adjusted section and chapter titles) and editing. Doubtlessly my (by now) familiarity with this interesting project will have played a part in this assessment. In the Netherlands I would recommend granting the title of doctor of philosophy (PhD) to Tereza Pavlíčková after discussing the project in the final defense.

A dated set of materials:

Earlier I remarked the following:

As audience researcher, it always makes me happy to read about extensive audience research-based projects. I applaud Pavlíčková for finishing the project. There is a significant handicap in working with a dated set of materials. There is a choice of either contextualizing them well, and understanding them historiographically - as in describing a particular period in time. Or, of course, to see how the material speaks to theoretical concerns that outweigh specific contexts of time and place. The choice here was for the second option.

As discussed in the small defense, the reasoning for using the earlier-collected material now is clear and makes sense. Choosing philosophical hermeneutics framework is helpful in that the project queries understanding authorship as negotiated by readers in their use of journalistic and factual media content. The roles found (using the author-as-discerned-in-the-text for approval, guidance, information and recognition) hold for different types of media use today.

We also discussed the structuring of the thesis.

Another 'given' for this reader is the structure of the thesis. Although I am not sure what exactly the rules are in the case of this particular thesis, I am assuming that it is mandatory to set out a theoretical framework, outline methodological principles and decisions and then present an analysis, followed by a conclusion that is largely a summary, and a series of considerations about the possible limitations of the project. Using an inductive approach to

qualitative data can make it the better choice to offer much of the theory after introducing the method, the material and the analysis.

In discussion, we managed well to bridge a philosophical hermeneutics framework and my own cultural studies background with its strong inductive drive towards theorization. I find that better signposting through more substantive chapter titles is useful. I respect that philosophical hermeneutics brings to bear a different kind of perspective. It allows us, amongst other things, to think in historical continuities over the past 75 years in how news and factual content have been presented to us by media that are primarily 'senders'. The mode of 'sending' still exists and is as relevant as it was for broadcast as for social media content - as this project also shows.

Questions of theory and the theoretical framework

The chosen framework, phenomenology and philosophical hermeneutics are, it turns out, not easily linked through to media and cultural studies generally. We have discussed this in the small viva. For the upcoming discussion, it seems to me that we could turn (again) to the use of the notion of 'productive practices' and what its merits are over other concepts to do with the engagement of readers with texts. Given that the thesis is invested in returning to the power of 'encoding' in media production, surely it makes sense to discuss media production separately? Understanding encoding processes and how they are made meaningful can of course be studied through analysis of audience materials. It will be interesting to discuss how this would relate to e.g., production focused interviews, that is what happens when media makers are interviewed in their capacity of a professional audience.

The referencing has been made less general and repetitive.

In editing the thesis, discussion of the concepts of the author and the reader have become more clear.

Also unclear is the somewhat roundabout discussion of 'the author' as a function of readerly interaction with media texts. It is perfectly legitimate, it seems to me, to study how factual media texts acquire authority, or authorial identities. As the current study shows, it deepens our understanding of how audiences relate to/with factual media to study how and whether they understand makers as authors, accord authority to presenters, and generally in making a text meaningful, merge implied, actual and imagined authors. The 'understood author' (or the-author-as-understood) works well as a concept to address this particular aspect of meaning making. More directly contrasting the author-as-understood to e.g., narratology's implied author (and reader), or use reader-response criticism, would have allowed for bypassing phenomenology's focus on the individual and knowable 'truth' which indeed would not have served this project well.

The referencing of Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding paper is now more measured. For the viva it will be interesting to discuss at more length how the encoding/decoding model could best be developed for today's media world, as well as from the perspective of various audiences (among them professionals and users in everyday life). While speculative, such a discussion could allow for showcasing the value of the concepts developed for the understood author in this thesis.

From my earlier comments: A significant part of the theoretical setting of the stage for the project involves discussion and referencing of the 'encoding-decoding' model. It is rather painful to see this short paper by Stuart Hall given the status of a philosophical exposé, which it was not. I recommend reading Ann Gray's chapter in a 1999 collection edited by Pertti Alasuutari where she refers to how Hall himself saw the encoding-decoding model as a provocation of sorts. In its first manifestation it was a 'position paper' addressed to the Centre for Mass Communications at Leicester in the mid-1970s. Stuart Hall put it thus: 'I had in my sights the CMCR at Leicester - that was who I was trying to blow out of the water' and goes on if the model has 'any purchase, now and later, it's a model because of what it suggests. It suggests an approach: it opens up new questions. It maps the terrain. But it's a model which has to be worked with and developed and changed' (these quotes are from Cruz and Lewis, *Viewing, reading, listening: Audiences and cultural reception*. Boulder CO: Westview Press 1994).

Gray then goes on to argue that Hall's version of the encoding/decoding model is a far cry from the way in which it has become, in media and cultural studies text books, almost reified as a description of the media communication process. After Gray's chapter appeared, numerous commentators have provided good contextualization of where this model comes, which I suggest is made part of the thesis. Or, easier to do: simply remove the too literal references to the encoding/decoding model and work primarily with Morley's postscript to his *Nationwide* research which provides the basis for part of the theoretical model that is later used deductively in data collection and analysis.

Also based on my earlier comments and to be discussed at more length is how this thesis contributes to discussion and understanding of the phenomenon of 'misinformation'. It could be argued that we have seen a redefining of 'objectivity' in how we understand news and factual information - with a larger tolerance for context, reinterpretation of factuality and perspective. How does the ascribed authority of the author-in-the-text meet critical engagement against misinformation and disinformation? Are there any safeguards that your discussion points to?

From my earlier report:

It did become a bit clearer how authority - the being and weighing in as an author as a textual effect- is a relevant topic also beyond the scope of a research project with 55+ Czech citizens. In fact, on p. 78 there is a strong link to why we need to salvage the notion of the author (as well as the emancipation of readers) because we live in times of social media-instigated cultures of misinformation.

Method and analysis

In my response to the draft version of the thesis there was a number of questions for explanation. A number of these were solved in the small defence. Others I will leave - as of course a PhD project at some point finds its final shape. For discussion in the viva I would like to return to discussion of reflexivity, an important concept in the chosen theoretical traditions - interesting to discuss how reflexivity was involved in the processes of data collection and analysis (the last is described as both a deductive and an inductive process in the thesis).

I note that I commented on this earlier, the excerpt below is from my earlier report and references the draft version. In the new version this is discussed on p. 97 - and I am particularly interested in how the right balance is found between finding commonalities and, on the other hand, differences between the units of analysis

On p. 95 I appreciate how the method of analysis is given proper consideration. Analysing qualitative data is rereading and summarizing - but it is also fed by a 'hermeneutics of hope'. Nicely put. Why though approach the material deductively rather than inductively and not be open to the ways in which informants format their author-in-the-text? Was this a question of the academic setting in which the PhD is presented? Was there a need to frame the project in terms of media production practices?

Another interesting theme for discussion would be 'authority' - it is a concept that emerges in different ways from the material. In relation of course to the author as understood, but there is also the authority of the interviewed media users themselves - how about their choices and interpretations? How do those speak to authority as a concept? Is there a link to ownership or co-ownership? A concept we have relatively recently started to use more given the changing media landscape and the way new roles and forms of expertise are now 'owned' and perhaps feared (as in the case of influencers whose information may or not be carefully checked).