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News from the 'Far East': Addressing Audiences Appropriately

In communicating with people, being comprehensible is a condition of convincing. Television constructs its content to ease understanding amongst those whom writers believe they are addressing.

Citing Habermas (1984), Poole argues that speaking to others is necessarily associated with implicitly making certain validity claims: that one is comprehensible, asserting truth, and sincere (1989: 19). Associating himself with this Critical Theory account of communication, Alasuutari writes of how in conversation people assume that participants are generally following co-operative maxims requiring 'us to avoid unfamiliar language' and contribute with validity and relevance (1997: 8).

In the more public arena of media communication, a similar consensus on preferred practice informs both television's address to news audiences and its reception by viewers (Webster and Phalen 1994: 22). Content is implicitly presented altruistically, as aiming at accuracy, adjusted to its audience's interests, and comfortably comprehensible.

Directly addressing studio cameras, news presenters intend to be read by viewers at home as sincerely truthful. Swiftly assembled narratives, bringing the world to people's attention, are couched in terms appropriate to assumed audiences, familiar to those presumed watching, creating 'an illusion of equality and closeness' (McQuail 1997: 118). Meaning can otherwise become opaque. A programme's presumption, of course, is not necessarily binding on real viewers. The claim to intelligibility can be contested.

Considered as discourse, programs incorporate 'implicit frames or cultural premises' (Alasuutari 1997: 7), articulating ways of understanding the world. Such constructions of reality are impotent unless easily comprehended by viewers. A program's horizons of explaining the non-televisual must be swiftly intelligible, experienced as unchallenging by those already securely situated in domestic circumstances. For the home is a life-world defined around easy pleasure-providing processes of comfortable (and comforting) consumption. In the absence of easily recognisable content the mind's playful response to television is inhibited: texts remain enigmatic, horizons of meaning cannot be crossed.

Consuming media, we develop textual narratives. Gaps in comprehension are bridged by viewers speculatively contributing meaning to television's indeterminate programs. But eliciting and enlarging upon the details of the medium's stories presupposes a broad base of comprehension, a pre-existing cultural complicity between communicators and audiences (McQuail 1997: 109).

For practicing journalists, conforming to presumptions about the world held by television's assumed or 'inscribed' (Meinhof 1994: 213) viewers can be limiting, a force for conceptual conservatism. The global public sphere of news production is simultaneously one of diverse cultural interpretation (Given 1998: 67), yet this may be difficult to pursue when curbed by an intended audience's horizons of understanding events.

I argue below that presenting Asian affairs in terms recognised by Western viewers can result in the former's construction as 'exotic' (Said 1995). Within this study, evaluation of programs as politically progressive or otherwise is distinct from assessing the audience's interpretation of television's meaning (Morley 1999: 140, 141). I pursue the latter elsewhere.

The News Narratives in Context

I am concerned here with/about a series of BBC World news stories forming a 'mediascape' mapping out a 'landscape of images' (Appadurai 1997: 35). Consecutive broadcasts enunciated a 'narrative-based account of a strip of reality' (ibid), Malaysia. Woven into this territorial television

emanating from the West, a closely related 'Enlightenment worldview' or political 'ideoscape' can be discerned, a self-regarding perception of the news reporter's concerned reason investigating the 'rotting core' (BBC) of an Asian polity.

During 1998 and 1999, viewers world-wide could watch intermittent episodes of an Asian judicial process with substantial socio-political consequences, continuing on screen over many months. How this globally serialised television news 'drama' ('The Resistable Rise of *Reformasi*'?) 'read' events in the world has policy implications for understanding the possibilities and problems of sense-making in the public sphere, the 'effective creation of publics and citizens through the media' (Donald 1998: 221).

Below, I consider aspects of **BBC News 24's** story of the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia's loss of office - his arrest, trial and the wider social aftermath of these events. Much of the narrative, like the judicial process, foregrounds ethical issues. 'Mr Ibrahim says he was the victim of scheming cabinet colleagues who wanted to stop corruption investigations.' (**BBC News M**, 9 February 1999) Reporting takes the form of establishing an abbreviated life-story where the focus is on the individual's character, 'substantiated' through 'life events' (Alasuutari 1997: 1).

My viewing of the BBC's coverage began with the UK national evening news transmitted on twentieth September 1998, an extraordinary narrative recording the arrest of Anwar Ibrahim during the Queen's visit to the Malaysian Commonwealth Games. It ended with the news report on fifteenth April 1999, announcing to viewers across the world that a 'guilty' verdict had concluded his corruption trial.

Between December 1999 and April 2000, a Malaysian colleague, research assistant and I each conducted audience-focussed studies of how the BBC had represented events in Malaysia on its news programs. In addition to extracts from internationally available **BBC News 24** covering Malaysian political occasions in November 1998 (Asia Pacific Economic Conference), February 1999 (Anwar Ibrahim trial commences), March 1999 (Sabah Election), and April 1999 (Anwar Ibrahim trial concludes), participants were shown segments of three late evening national **BBC News** programs from September 1998 (the Queen's visit to Malaysia, the Commonwealth Games, and the arrest of Anwar Ibrahim).

Focus groups took place at the National University of Malaysia, both East (Kuching) and West (Kuala Lumpur) Malaysian campuses and at a private Kuala Lumpur college in the higher education sector, Lim Kok Wing Institute of Creative Technology. Immediately after screening the news extracts, discussion in these hour long conversations with students who had opted to take part was initiated by myself, with a Malaysian Chinese female colleague facilitating one of the groups at the National University's West Malaysian campus, and a male graduate research assistant (from the same ethnic background) conducting two of the discussions at the University's eastern site!

Issues raised by group leaders in these loosely structured discussions included participants' comprehension of news content, and their consenting, or critical antagonism, to views expressed on screen. Eight focus groups were held with thirty two people participating in our consideration of BBC news. In West Malaysia, contributors were easily discerned as belonging to one of the three major ethnic groups of Chinese, Indians and Malays. East Malaysian participants sometimes indicated a more complex ethnic background (eg. a Chinese mother and Malay father) or represented a minority voice (eg. Bidayuh or Melanau).

Validity Claims in the Public Sphere: Audience Address and Orientalism

Said famously wrote of the 'Orient' as a construction, as 'almost a European invention', a 'place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences' (1995: 1). Seeking to facilitate their intended Western audience's comprehension of Asian nationhood during times of complex change, BBC journalists can be shown to have deployed orientalisng horizons of explanation. Attempting to render events in a distant country intelligible, they mystify and marginalise consumers and content (Jensen 1999: 127).

'If I were someone from Britain watching the footage, I would think Malaysia is an exotic island wanting to be freed by the West, but currently ruled by an evil junta. Yeh. Oh, poor Malaysians! We

must free them, free them! Free the freedom fighter, Anwar! This kind of image!' (Malay male contributor to East Malaysian focus group)

Like the surrounding skin of an exotic fruit in terminal decay, an outwardly flourishing Asian conspicuous consumption has been 'peeled away', fractured open by an economic downturn, allowing televisual discourse to disclose the 'rotting core' (BBC). A familiar framework of comprehending geographical distance as increasing incivility is celebrated as 'we' (with some relief?) reductively catch a glimpse of the 'other' (re-emerging as the problem we always knew it was?)

'The opulence of the Asian tigers has been peeled away to reveal a rotting core. Collapsed economies, corrupt dictatorships, violent police, and people who by the day are losing all respect for the leaders who gave them what little wealth they have.' (BBC News 24, 16 November 1998)

Asia's construction in the European imagination as a place of 'remarkable experiences' reverberates once more in these BBC News 24 narratives. Primarily produced by English journalists addressing as their viewers a British audience (and only secondarily, the world), judicial processes in the 'Far East' (Malaysia) are exoticised as 'revelations', constructed as 'extraordinary', as taken to excess.

The subject of many of these narratives, the trial of the Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister, resonates with 'more and more' allegations, 'it just goes on and on'. Complexities of legal challenge and counter-challenge have vanished in these accounts, entirely evaporating in the tropical heat of sensational story-telling.

'Malaysia has quite literally been washing its dirty linen in public, parading as evidence a queen size mattress which is said to bear Mr. Anwar's semen stains. There have been lurid allegations of sexual trysts with both men and women.' (BBC News 24, 8 February 1999)

“Anwar Ibrahim’s evidence could be potentially explosive for Dr. Mahathir. (...) He knows, if you like, as one person put it here, where the bodies are buried’ (BBC News 24, 9 February 1999)

Articulating accessible discourse to those prioritised in authorial minds, audience seen a culturally close, a program’s horizons of understanding the world are constrained. Familiar frameworks, while reassuring, can divert viewers from considering diversity, from inquiring as to where, and why, the ‘exotic’.

More widely, an audience address acknowledging viewers’ prior knowledge may yet do little to support them in coming to terms with complex events. From a policy perspective, journalistic practice in news television has to map out a careful path reconciling two potentially conflicting criteria of acceptable contributions to the public sphere: it needs to satisfy validity claims, first to be communicating appropriately to intended audiences, and, second, to be accurately exploring an issue in terms of defensible political and social categories.

An orientalist address to Western audiences of the kind considered here, with references to the ‘rotting core’ of a social polity held in place by ‘violent police’, not surprisingly alienated our Asian viewers. Suggesting that ‘police used tear gas and water canons with *relish*’ (participant’s summary of a voiceover, her emphasis), BBC news reports were said to focus on ‘scenes which depict violence and riots’, implying ‘the whole county is going down’ (Malaysian Eurasian and Indian women respondents).

Encouraging intended Western viewers to contrast their circumstances with such images, a sense of safety is manufactured for BBC audiences at homes. ‘Before I go off to bed, I want to see political upheaval in other countries’ (Malay male). But these overseas reports convey ‘malicious ideas towards Malaysia’ (Malay male), an impression that ‘the political stability of Malaysia is questionable’, a sense of impending doom in Kuala Lumpur’ (Malay male), of ‘Malaysia going the dogs!’ (Indian female). Instead, in considering the West’s representation of Asian affairs we need, as Macdonald remarks, a measured review of the compatibility between ‘popular forms of audiences engagement (...) and methods of analysis’ (1998:124).

**Domestic Perceptions of a Dangerous World:
Continually Constructing Conflict?**

Television news does not correspond mirror-like to reality. Instead it plays with the material and social world *solemnly*, representing selectively. As we have seen, the medium is often accused of engaging audiences by continually emphasising instances of conflict rather than co-operation, by constructing a 'controversial case' (Indian female). The Malaysian rioting 'only lasted for about a day or two. The way the media portrayed it outside (the country) was as though it lasted for a month!' (Malay male)

Media in the public sphere must appropriately address intended viewers. Global television does so differently from programs presumed to be consumed only by national audiences, with those producing the latter attuned to likely local consequences of transmission. News coverage of social unrest associated with the Asian economic crisis is a case in point.

The Malaysian 'media locally had to portray it differently from world news because it's so sensitive really. If the media portrayed everything exactly as it was happening' it would either cause panic or further protest. 'We went through a revolt in 1969', 'tension is still there'. While 'the new generation, people like us, are actually together now', to 'bring back that past', 'it's going to cause a lot of problems' (Chinese and Malay males).

If social disturbance is shown on local television, 'crazy people are going to go on the streets and they're going to wreak havoc': 'it really is a good thing to condition people to think in a certain way, because if you give this sort of information to people who do not have the ability to *think* rationally' they might cause 'racial riots' (Chinese/Malay female agreeing with Malay male, her emphasis).

Like a much celebrated game, news programs announce their regular fixtures with the facts, albeit never entirely absorbing complexities 'out there'. Presentations to camera construct (accounts of) reality from particular perspectives,

exercising implicit 'prejudices' or presumptions which may (or may not) be noted by audiences. 'It looks as if the whole news paints a picture that the government is the one who is guilty' (Chinese/ Malay male). Comprehensible readings of the real are produced - always from a point-of-view - for intended viewers.

'The extremists think, the media's lying. Whereas in actual fact, they're only concealing the truth. They're not lying, they're concealing the truth, because they want public safety, not public unrest'. 'The local news is conditioned so that peace is maintained at all times' (Malay male). 'Peace is what everybody wants, right?' (Indian female).

'Malaysian news is trying to create a sense of safety for the people. This is what we want you to know and to think. This is it. Accept. Whereas BBC news, it stimulates people, the viewers to think' (Malay male); it 'triggers your thinking' (Indian female); 'some may perceive it as the "wake-up call", don't sit still, it's time to think about what you should do' (Chinese/Malay female).

Programmes perceive the world within perspectival horizons of understanding, encouraging assumptions to be entertained, emphasising endemic conflict or co-operation. Television's scripting plays with the non-televisual to achieve (depending on one's position) a permitted or perfidious goal. The BBC suggests Malaysians 'are united in opposing the Government, but I feel that is not really the case' (Indian female).

'CNN's much more biased, compared with BBC' in privileging Western (US and UK) perspectives, asserted an Indian participant in one of my Kuching focus groups, drawing on his experience of the wide range of satellite television channels easily available in East Malaysia. Responses at the National University of Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur indicated agreement that Western news content foregrounded conflict rather than co-operative endeavour. BBC images 'highlight the demonstration, compared with local (television)' (female Malay).

Stressing strife ('they play with the conflict'), argued a male Malay contributor, allows BBC news to 'attract the

viewers'. Hinting at an understanding of media propaganda as pejorative play, wilfully misrepresenting the world, the same undergraduate later remarked how overseas television journalists dramaturgically 'manipulate the news', 'they play with the words, they play with the issues'.

Discussing television coverage of the Queen on her visit to the Malaysian Commonwealth Games, this Malay student reflected critically on the ethics of program production: 'they play with the visual', 'they play with the voiceover'. BBC commentary suggested that the Queen, shown enjoying the spectacular view from the top of the world's tallest building (the Petronas twin towers located in Kuala Lumpur's business district), perceived only the country's 'economic closedown'. Pointing out the contradiction, our contributor concluded, 'you can see the contrast, within the picture and then the voice over.' This is 'dangerous, very criminal'.

Conclusion

Here, I have focussed on there being necessary, if sometimes regressive, horizons of meaning to which the production of content on television news must conform To be consumed by their domestic audiences in comfort, programs need to be quickly, unproblematically comprehensible, framed by unchallenging assumptions. Regrettably, as in the West's coverage of these events in Asia, a myopic understanding of social processes can emerge.

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1. Opening a space and time for alternative voices, three of the eight focus groups were co-ordinated by Malaysian Chinese. I'm very grateful to Winny Liew and Donny Chan, lecturer and graduate researcher respectively.

Notes

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