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## What Do Malaysians Think of *Global* TV?

### Introduction

Television's audiences are citizen-viewers. In analysing the medium's relationship with those who watch it, the consequences of that relationship for the audience's informed and practical judgements, for their attitudes and actions, must surely be a primary focus of consideration. The "notion of television having the potential power to form and to change people in certain ways needs to continue to inform research" (Corner 1995: 156).

Broadcasting is not invariably educational, ethically edifying, and enlightening. From documentary to drama, serial to situation comedy, I shall suggest, television *presumes* its audiences to be not altogether ignorant, *prescribes* (im)moral or (im)practical conduct, and seeks to *persuade* them of what is (not) the case. Programmes presume, prescribe, persuade, prompting identification, securing (political, practical) alignment. "It's important that Malaysia move forward as quickly as possible (in electronic communications). But I have seen very good signs." (John Lauer, General Manager, Microsoft Malaysia, talking on TV2's *Global*)

Television transmits, viewers receive. Between February 1995 and February 1996, assisted by five associate interviewers,<sup>1</sup> I took part in detailed focus group discussions with over sixty Malaysians at the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (Bangi), Universiti Sains Malaysia (Penang), and in Kuala Lumpur (Limkokwing Institute of Creative Technology and some self-selected citizens). In our conversations, responses to both Western and Malaysian television were sought and generously provided. This work continues: I am immensely

grateful to all who took part. Here, globalisation is not homogenisation (cf. Birch 1995: 8).

Below, I offer a theoretical perspective on these talks. My approach owes much to a decade of thinking through the implications for media analysis of a philosophy known (impressively!) as hermeneutic phenomenology. To a degree, this work has also been a rejection of the *post-structuralist* considerations circulating in much film and television enquiry [although I think that such enquiry is often, at its most plausible, itself implicitly phenomenological (see Wilson 1995 and 1996)]. In doing so, I have been recently sustained by the words of Dissanayake, who writes:

Asian communication scholars should turn more towards philosophical approaches like phenomenology which do not accept the rigid division between appearance and reality and which, in addition, emphasize imagination, intuition and values (1988: 7).

Broadcasting presumes, prescribes, persuades, seeking audience agreement. Televised stories, whether emerging from news and current affairs (“factual”) or drama (“fictional”), are “narrative sketches” (Wilson 1992). Deliberately compressed to fit within a brief evening bulletin, or purposefully enigmatic to heighten viewer interest, television’s abbreviated tales assume their recipients possess sufficient information to “flesh out” their meaning. A presenter’s passing reference to events in Kota Bharu, without further specifying its location or identity, assumes his or her listeners to be already knowledgeable Malaysians.

Audiences respond to the inhabitants of these narrative sketches, to individuals appearing in *X-Files* (TV2) or on *Berita Perdana*. Watching programmes, viewers become entangled and involved, or, bored and disenchanted, their minds drift to other matters. In this and other ways, looking at television can be said to “play” across the meaning of a programme: gaze becomes intermittent glance (or a glance suggests items rewarding of sustained attention). Delighted or distracted, a TV sports spectator’s attention to the screen may be sustained or spasmodic.

Involved audiences identify with what they recognise (subsequently moving, if necessary, to distance themselves

from what is perceived as morally reprehensible or impossibly impractical). Television sustains the moment of identification for its intended viewers, repetitively representing on screen aspects of their everyday lives, their "itineraries of the everyday" (Lull 1995: 165). Comedy programmes (*America's Funniest Home Videos*) and series (like the ageing Australian *Sullivans*) both insist on domestic experience as fundamental - a familiar, familial "life-world" (or life-style) for the assumed audience.

Discussion of viewers' identification with, or critical distancing from, programme content was central to the focus groups with which this article concerns itself. Prior to our conversations, contributors watched an hour of television extracts. In 1995, at UKM and in Kuala Lumpur, segments of drama and local news were screened (*L.A. Law* and a US situation comedy, *Good Advice*). The following year, at Limkokwing and USM, for reasons which will shortly become evident, the emphasis was exclusively on talkshows: *Oprah Winfrey* and *Global* (TV2).

In so far as was possible, all the focus groups considered the same issues, introduced by a set of questions about people's interest in, and identification with (or criticism of) what they had seen. The discussion also pursued other topics, concerned with a programme's intelligibility, accuracy or inaccuracy, likely influence, and intended audience. As I hope is already evident, these questions were neither arbitrary nor "innocent". Rather, they were attempts to bring to bear certain theory-based concerns with broadcast meaning and audience identification upon empirical data, allowing the author to philosophically focus upon viewers talking about what they had just seen on television. I was particularly interested in broadcasting's cross-cultural communication, where (as in the case of three series I shall discuss) the production source was overseas. "The very act of viewing a foreign programme itself is a culturally determined social activity." (Goonasekera 1996: 48)

### 1. Talkshows on Television

Rigid "boundaries between transmission and reception, between source and destination ( ... ) no longer exist" (Mules 1995: 30).

Viewers, like programmes, variously produce meaning. On talkshows, a host of narrative sketches are constructed for creative development and debate by audiences at home and in the studio. Televisual sound is important. By examining the relationship between those who tell their stories and those who listen and participate in the studio, I suggest, we can learn much about how domestic audiences respond both to this genre and to talk elsewhere on television. Talkshows are, in this way, "paradigmatic", presenting us with a model of how the medium operates more widely, its interactions with viewers everywhere:<sup>2</sup>

television's particular appropriation of the traditional narrative actually opens this form up to active, give-and-take participation from the viewing audience. (Press 1995: 57)

Additionally, on a global scale, historical forms of television *broadcasting* to an entire population are diversifying into *narrowcasting* to particular groups with special interests. In Malaysia, this has been the case for some time. TV2, for instance, addresses an audience with multicultural preferences for English, Mandarin, or Tamil films. Increasingly, microwave, UHF, cable and satellite television, along with multi-media on the internet, will offer distinct products to distinguishable audiences. Indeed, these changes were the topic of TV2's *Global* programme (12th November, 1995), upon which I focus below. Ultimately, one can speculate, *broadcasting* or mass communication will entirely be replaced by *broadband* transmissions or "demassification" (Morris and Ogan 1996: 41), a multiplicity of different services delivered to the home, office, pedestrian and vehicle by cable or satellite.

Inevitably, such diversity will impose a requirement for cheaper programming, and in this new economy of meaning, the talkshow with its casual, drop-in, and largely unpaid participants will flourish. It will emerge as typically televisual, its attention to distinctive and unusual life-styles and issues mirroring narrowcasting's own multi-channel environment addressing particular audience preoccupations. On talkshows, moreover, the "play" of meaning between programme and viewer is especially evident, a field of complex interactions which can function as a source of ways of thinking more

widely about the interrelationship of electronic communication and user. As Morris and Ogan observe, the concept of "interactivity" is "more recently applied to all new media, from two-way cable to the Internet" (1996:46).

Below, I argue in greater detail for the talkshow's paradigmatic status within television aesthetics, as a source of heuristic models for interpreting our electronic future. Within this framework (or horizon) of understanding, I discuss (section 3) the distance between responses which might be anticipated of talkshow audiences, and some of those which occurred at Universiti Sains Malaysia (1996). Differences of this nature are important, I believe, in beginning to theorise wider consumer use of new communication technology (eg. the internet). Finally (in section 4), but still within the interpretative horizons of my interest in the forms of "playful" involvement exhibited by audiences, I discuss responses at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (and in Kuala Lumpur) to the American television dramas, *L.A. Law* and *Good Advice* (1995). Here, some viewers imaginatively participated in programmes, subsequently "bringing meaning back home". My article concludes with a projection of possible play, an anticipatory note on electronic narrowcasting. In writing of textual involvement and identification as "play", I am emphasising (like Bhabha and others) the *temporal* immersion of culture and its appropriation by individuals, its cognitive movements, "moments or processes" (Schirato 1995: 358).

## 2. Talkshows and *Global* (TV2, 8.30pm, Sunday 12th November 1995)

***Global* (talk show)** - The Information Technology Revolution: Featuring issues like the development taking place in the information technology industry, its implications, the advantages and disadvantages of being a "fore-runner", and the social and cultural consequences of the IT Revolution.

(*New Sunday Times*, 12.11.95)

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to a compilation of videotaped extracts from two Radio Television Malaysia (TV2) talkshows - *Global* (approximately one-third of a programme) and *Oprah Winfrey* (three brief segments). This compilation was shown to twenty-seven student-participants and three associate interviewers: Limkokwing Institute of Creative Technology, Kuala Lumpur, 30th January, twelve participants in three focus groups; Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, 10th February, fifteen participants in four focus groups.

My comments in section 2 concern the talkshow, in general, and *Global* in particular, perceived here as important evidence in pointing to a global as well as Malaysian televisual aesthetic for new times. Indeed, one could note that, compared with the American talkshow, *Global's* discursive style is less combative, more collaborative, valorising perhaps, "consensus and communitarianism" (Wee 1995: 295). This may, indeed, represent a Malaysian inflection of the genre (cf. Yeap's "Freedom and Accountability in the Asian Dialectic" 1996).

Section 2 considers the segment used from this edition of *Global* on the social implications for Malaysia of the internet: here the host, Mahadzir Lokman, mediated questions from a studio audience addressed to a panel of experts. Section 3 of this essay discusses issues of Malaysian audience identification raised by the *Oprah Winfrey* extracts, in part emanating from its culture of contestation (a culture related to wider perceptions of entertaining television).

i. *the talkshow as "participatory programming"*

The media "must never let official voices dominate public debate by drowning out alternative voices" (Latif 1996: 13).

The talk show is television tinged with democracy, a pluralistic moment in which participants and audiences (sometimes) share an egalitarian exchange of opinion. Information can be assessed and conveyed nationally, with consciousness of particular issues heightened amongst the attentive masses (cf. Karthigesu 1988: 311). Here, "experts" may be scrutinised by those whose experience is of the more mundane. Technical contributions can be "deconstructed", evaluated for their illu-

mination (or otherwise) of everyday life. In this, the talkshow anticipates the future community use of the internet, which "can bring specialists and experts to more people, through the use of technology, whether it's telemedicine, or some may say, satellite medicine" (Dan E. Khoo, Chairman of Pikom, *Global*).

Television news brings the public to the private, exhibiting the international to the family at home. Talkshows like *Oprah Winfrey* invert this process, opening the sphere of the subjective and personal for inspection and comment, emphasising its equal claim to attention. The egalitarian promptings emanating from the talkshow are also claimed to be a characteristic of other forms of electronic communication eg. interaction on the internet.

For these reasons, the talkshow is referred to as "participatory programming" (Livingstone and Lunt 1994). Its storytelling, discussion, and sometimes passionate argument have, like communication on the internet, been considered as more or less plausible instances of rational or "ideal speech" (Habermas 1979 and 1987) in which all participants are permitted an unimpeded and similar chance to contribute. (Cf. "Cyberspace way to woo voters", *Malaysian Star*, 10.3.96).

For Habermas, the ultimate goal of such dialogical conversation, implicit if not always explicitly stated, must be truth, a consensus supported by reasons which "could be agreed to by everyone, whether in this culture or any other, who was uncoerced and who had all the relevant information" (Hoy 1996: 85).<sup>3</sup> Considered against the criteria of ideal speech, talkshows (and television talk more generally) can be judged as to whether their influence on audiences is rational, or is alternatively,

a persuasive effect exerted in a non-rational way against the interests of the viewer and perhaps against those of the public as a whole too (Corner 1995: 156).

Critical theorists like Habermas hold that, if genuinely committed to rational discussion, contributors to discursive inquiries (of which talkshows and television interviews are surely instances) must meet certain standards. At least implicitly, they should acknowledge a "discourse ethics". They are required to avoid, in particular, responses which might be



construed as exercising political or psychological force in regard to others present. On *Global*, for instance, the convention of waiting one's turn to intervene, an opportunity to speak "awarded" by the host, was momentarily (if self-consciously) infringed. "If I could jump in real quickly ..." (John Lauer, General Manager, Microsoft Malaysia).

The use of sexist language is a notable instance of less than ideal speech.

With this technology, the weaker sex, so to speak, can actually now do ... (Dr. Ahmad Tasir, Director of MIGHT)

They don't like that word, "weaker" sex. (Lokman)

All right! (Tasir)

Gender equality here. (Lokman)

I'm sorry about that. (Tasir)

Likewise, overbearing technical "jargon" is inappropriate if a talkshow is to approximate conditions of ideal speech. A panel contributor to *Global* was evidently sensitive to this issue, talking of university communication on the internet as "(bringing) the lecture hall to the people" (Prof. Madya Dr. Mohd Safar Hashim, Dean of Communication Dept., Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia). On the other hand, a particularly technical intervention was passed over in silence, left unmediated by the host. We "do need an international roaming facility for internet names and addresses" (Dan E. Khoo, Chairman of Pikom).

Considered as participatory programming, the internet edition of *Global* fell short of the ideal since, as Lokman himself put it, "we have an all-male panel". Ironically, the only female voice heard during this third and final segment of the programme was that of an audience member who raised her concern about the language of "expertise" and those whom it excluded.

With information technology, we see more technical jargon being used in everyday language. What kind of preparations do we have to make in, say, the lower school levels? And also, what are these implications, especially towards people who are still computer-illiterate?

Elsewhere in the programme, conforming to conditions of ideal speech, contributions which lacked clarity, potentially hindering the reasoned exchange of ideas on *Global*, were immediately interpreted by Lokman. A question was asked about the use of information technology in providing university off-campus education:

... has there been any attempt to have off-campus courses whereby people can just, you know, from their house have access to universities and even to their lecturers to, sort of, build up their, courses, any courses that they want to do? (member of the audience)  
In other words, distance on-line learning.  
(Lokman)

Talkshows depend upon a sustaining acknowledgement by all involved that there are both shared rules according to which those present can participate, and that there are irreducible differences between people which generate topics for a sometimes disconcerting debate. As with narrowcasting to specific audiences, talkshows flourish upon (and conceivably encourage) a multiplicity of life-styles.

ii. *the talkshow as paradigmatic programme*

C'mon Get Happy.

See the Partridge Family, 4PM Weekdays on TV1.

*Galaxy Advert* (Australian Cable and Microwave television channels)

I've suggested that the talkshow can function as a source of ideas which are useful within the broader study of electronic communication. Talkshow themes are, for instance, narrowly defined, paradoxically allowing them to be widely promoted. In a "morally-emaciated West" (Wee 1995: 289) salacious narrative sketches are compressed into programme guides to whet the appetite of potential viewers. Australia's Channel Ten offered its afternoon audience (25th March, 1996):

12.00pm *The Ricki Lake Show* "I Think You Should Know I'm After Your Man."

- 1.00pm Donahue "Uproar Over Big Rise in Shock Therapy on Kids and the Elderly"  
 2.00pm The Oprah Winfrey Show "Parish Forgives Priest for Sexual Misconduct"  
 [The Green Guide, The Age (Melbourne), 22.3.96]

Parallel to the talkshow's articulation of particular topics, narrowcasting's many television channels arrive by satellite, cable and microwave, addressed to discrete constituencies of interest. Frequently, a channel exclusively features a single genre of television: international news (eg. CNNI), documentaries (eg. Discovery Channel), cartoons (eg. Cartoon Network), and so on. But like the talkshow's efforts at a simultaneously specific and broad appeal, if these channels are not to disappear into ethereal obscurity, they must continuously persuade a wider audience to switch them on. "Wake Up Laughing!" (Optus Vision, Australia).

Both the talkshow and the internet are expressly interactive, a characteristic that earlier forms of television could conceal (allowing misguided claims that television audiences are passive). "Even in the US, you can send a message to President Clinton through an e-mail" (*Global* audience contributor). In programmes like *Global* and *Oprah Winfrey*, host and participants co-operate, conspire, and engage in conflict over sense and sensitivities. People at home watch television in domestic privacy, generally excluding the media researcher from their playful involvement in the medium. Confronted by this banishment, the intense interaction which characterises the talkshow, so visible and audible on screen, can be suggestive of how the audience behaves more widely, behind the lace curtains of suburbia (in Petaling Jaya or Princeton!)

Associated with the talkshow, I'd suggest, are two sets of concepts, both of importance in understanding audience use of television, as well as consumer involvement in the new electronic media of communication.

First, the idea of "familiarity", embodied in the regular appearance of the dependable talkshow host. Mahadzir Lokman or Oprah Winfrey greet each audience, announcing the return and return of their programme.

To the first-timers, thank you, and don't forget to come back. For those who have been here

for the past thirty episodes, thank you, and still go on for the next thirty episodes. (Lokman)

Often this familiarity is familial, constructed on television by avuncular personalities, or by those who prompt audience memories of a kindly "aunty", defusing the inhumanity of the television apparatus. Here, as frequently elsewhere on television, the well known mediates the "other".

This familiarity has its cost, the monocular vision of a safe similarity. The mechanism by which such easy recognition is achieved is a "repetitive ritualised symbol system" (Goonasekera 1996: 57). Popular broadcasting's reiteration of a relatively narrow range of pre-given generic formulae inevitably limits the appearance of alternative perspectives. Breakfast television's *Good Morning, Australia* (Channel Ten) mirrors *Malaysia Hari Ini* (Channel Three), pre-occupied with the world in parallel ways.

In this context, *Global* must be recognised as cautious experiment. Even as such, its horizons of understanding the changing world of communication technology were not transparently unproblematic. Audiences at home were asked (using an on-screen display) whether Malaysia could become a net exporter of information technology products. A panel member challenged the accuracy of the question, interrupting as the programme closed, his voice heard above the studio audience applause. His contribution was immediately "recouped" by the host's appreciative display.

We already are (a net exporter) ...  
(Dan E. Khoo, Chairman of Pikom).  
Thank you very, very, very much for being  
here with us distinguished panelist. (Lokman)

Nevertheless, familiar, friendly faces in well-known spaces, albeit sometimes electronic simulacra (without real-life originals), provide reassuring support in a difficult world. Welcoming an audience member (about to ask a question) to the studio, Lokman asserted, "I have to highlight this gentleman here. He came on behalf of (a colleague) who had a sore throat earlier, who could hardly speak."

Cultivating "familiarity" is important in "new communications". Narrowcasting emphasises (for economic reasons,

if for no other) "channel loyalty", seeking to secure viewers' regular return to the same channel with which they become increasingly well acquainted. Likewise, the internet's "domesticated" dependance on "home pages" offers consumers a safe and simple platform from which to explore a complex virtual reality.

The second central concept in these studies is that of the "playful consciousness" displayed by the talkshow's audience, whether in the studio or at home. This is the process of engagement and disengagement with programmes which characterises all who involve themselves in the different modes of electronic communication. Such heightened interactivity forms the spectatorial awareness of those who "commute" (Schroder 1988) between being informed and entertained, between constructing and deconstructing meaning, or between identifying, and discovering a critical distance.

The concept of commuting is also, I'd suggest, an appropriate idea with which to analyse the interactive (virtual) travel associated with the information super-highway. As on the contemporary urban "freeway", excessive "commuting" in the talkshow or on the "net" can undermine the success of the communication it sets out to achieve.

It always gets heated up at the end of the show when everybody wants to say something, but, we *have* to end it (Lokman).

### iii. *the talkshow's relationship with its audiences*

An audience's relationship with a talkshow, then, can be characterised as "playful", a cognitive involvement offering from time to time the pleasure of identification with host or participants as they narrate and reflect upon their experiences. Interacting imaginatively with contributors to an Oprah Winfrey show, playing across cultures (or commuting) to agree with what is said, spectators identify (see section 3). The play of identification, I believe, is also a distinctive feature of connecting to the internet.

Identification is a complex process, to a large degree occurring at a semi-conscious level. Reflection, I suggest, reveals three phases or "moments" in this spectatorial align-

ment with a character's story. Here, "implied" and actual audiences coincide: real viewers recognise the programme's preferences.

Identification rests on creating from the "text" a coherent character and narrative, on being able to accept as appropriate the programme's *presumption* of its audience's ability to find the initial (narrative) sketch intelligible. Identifying, viewers involve themselves in a character's story, in its related *prescriptions* for action (its moral or practical guidance), and *persuasion* of what is the case.

Applying these points to the television genre before us, commences with noting that the talkshow's participants recount narrative sketches to its studio and domestic audiences. These are more or less indeterminate tales, immediately mediated by a host (Lokman, Donahue, et al.), clarified and redirected to spectators presumed to possess the cultural capital (or information) necessary to find these moderated accounts intelligible. Adding to story content, audiences cooperate in constructing their own prescriptive advice on how to act. And narratives here and elsewhere, as the postmodernist writer Lyotard (1984) has observed, can be a particularly potent form of argument, persuasive of truth or falsity to an attentive audience.

Narrative was skillfully used on *Global* by one panel member, to demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt the social value of information technology. Innovative electronic engineering effects the release of otherwise creative minds from tedium.

I was just driving up the toll highway the other day and as I entered the toll somebody handed me a ticket, and I thought, "Boy, that's kind of a boring job, everyday, to be handing tickets out, you know, to thousands of cars as they go by." Now certainly there are some things you could do by putting automatic machines in there that would make that ticket-giver obsolete. But we shouldn't be fearful of that. We should say, "Now we'll allow those people to have an opportunity to have higher value-added jobs in society." (John Lauer, General Manager, Microsoft Malaysia)

A studio audience drawn from Kuala Lumpur can easily locate themselves in this tale, possessing as they do the knowledge of "toll highways" and their revenue collection system presumed amongst listeners. In identifying with its central character, Lauer, the compassionate and creative driver himself, the intended audience acquiesces without difficulty in this parable of liberation for all. The "important thing is that everyone gives themselves the proper tool set so that they're prepared to move forward in this new information age" (Lauer).

Concluding *Global's* narratives with a moral, Lokman used the "we" of identification to align himself with his audience in a final programmed (autocued) moment of presumption, prescription, and persuasion. Here, of course, the programme's "closure" lacked the finality of film. Dismissing his audience in a discourse which was typically televisual, Lokman's ending was also the anticipation of a return.

As we grow (assisted by information technology) in leaps and bounds, it is crucial *not* to lose sight of our values, culture, and social responsibility. There are, as in everything, advantages and disadvantages in this, and it becomes our responsibility to strike a balance. And our topic next week, don't forget to join us, will be, sustainable pest management. (laughter)

Finally, it is worth noting the likelihood that a productive account of the cognitive play between audience and talkshow (a characteristic, I have noted, of electronic communication everywhere) can be developed by drawing on research in applied linguistics or "discourse studies". For the viewer's interactive negotiation of televised meaning can be considered "conversational", with making sense of a programme drawing on his or her wider "social intelligence" (Goody 1995), abilities manifested in linguistic performance.

### 3. *Oprah Winfrey* : Anticipated and Actual Audience Responses

Audiences "are now regarded as active seekers, selectors, and interpreters of media messages" (Michaels 1995: 192).

Focus groups reveal the "cultural discourses" (Much 1992: 53) of viewer and viewed, the construction and adoption of audience identity in response to a "cultural array", the presumption, prescription, persuasion of programmes.

Here, I wish to raise some issues of identification associated with the *Oprah Winfrey* talkshow, extracts from which were, as noted earlier, screened in conjunction with *Global*. Clearly (at least for those not committed to a moribund structuralism), real audiences' responses to television can be at odds with anticipated "readings". Actual viewers, with "one eye" on their own experience, may strongly resist a character's "favourable" portrayal, preferring to align themselves with the programme's perception of the less estimable. Diverse audiences produce diverse interpretations, demonstrating the "social contingency of meaning" (Corner 1995: 151).

The three *Oprah Winfrey* programmes from which segments were used in the 1996 research at Limkokwing Institute of Creative Technology and the Universiti Sains Malaysia were, in order of screening (totalling about forty minutes):

- "What I Want My Spouse to Learn", 2pm, Channel Ten, Thursday 19th October, 1994 (Australia)
- "What Does Your Spouse Mean by That?", 1pm, Channel Two, Sunday 22nd October, 1995 (Malaysia)
- "Are Talkshows Bad II ?", 2pm, Channel Ten, Wednesday 18th October, 1994 (Australia).

- i. *narrative construction and television's "horizons of identification"*

Programmes represent characters more or less favourably, establishing or undermining them as subjects with whom audiences can easily identify. Television can "cue" viewers "into new imaginative behaviour, new alignments of sympa-



thy and new areas of knowledge" (Corner 1995: 137). On the other hand, images of convicted criminals surrounded by their custodians on the mid-evening news are less than likely to prompt empathy: they connote individuals worthy only of contempt. In this way television marks out (sometimes hazy) "horizons of identification", an always limited range of character-driven narratives with which an audience can appropriately identify.

Placed centrally in her shows, enabling meaning and insight to emerge without faltering, Oprah Winfrey is herself clearly a focus for audience identification. In the first segment shown in this research, from a programme re-introducing Oprah after a summer break, she allowed those watching controlled access to her "behind-the-scenes" identity: "At forty years old ( ... ) I finally learned to *swim*. I had been afraid of the water all my life, but I learned to swim this summer."

The second segment screened (from "What Does Your Spouse Mean By That?") took as its topic a familiar theme of talkshows, relationships in marriage (or "couple communication") and variation in behaviour between the sexes: "women (unlike men) often feel, 'no, it's talking to each other that makes us close'" (member of the audience). This pursuit of behavioural prescriptions for everyday life turned, at Oprah's instigation, to consider gender differences in assertiveness: "Did you ever make a call after call (complaining) and get nowhere, but then your spouse calls, and, presto! Whoo! Done!?" Bringing this segment to a close, Oprah anticipated the next subject (not screened in the research): "when we return, we're going to shift gears and talk about the way women talk outside the home, and how many are sabotaging themselves." Presumption, prescription and persuasion are clearly on the agenda.

The final *Oprah Winfrey* segment shown was, like the first, videotaped in Australia. Its subject was reflexive, the effects on audiences of talkshows themselves. A social psychologist had produced a book arguing that "basically" "talkshows are more harmful than good" (Oprah): this rashness was rewarded by an invitation to appear on the programme to defend her professional judgement. "One of the points you made from this study was that talkshows exploit people who are down and out, and leave them hanging after the show ends." (Oprah) Or, as an audience member put this

(alleged) prescriptive failure, "I want to know how you get from that pain to get to happiness, and I don't get to see that a lot of times on the show."

The accusation was energetically debated, offering clearly contrasting positions for audience identification, and, indeed, the possibility of an "Oprah defeat". "(The) show has a responsibility to give us a solution, to give us a light" (audience contribution). "I think we've helped the therapy industry" (Oprah). "How could ( ... ) sitting up talking about crime, or violence, or abuse, be more damaging to people than seeing it?" (Oprah) Talkshows "have definitely helped me out" (teenage contributor). The segment concluded with Oprah's requesting her audience to signal preferred topics for future shows (the following segment, not screened in the research).

The analysis of focus group responses to *Oprah Winfrey* (and *Global*) is, at the time of writing, work in progress, so that the following comments are inevitably brief. Nevertheless, I shall note some moments in the reception process which illustrate the horizons of audience identification, the experience and limits of their empathy with those on screen.

The first segment on Oprah's summer lasted ninety seconds (a brevity resulting from my editing). Its inclusion had merely been intended to provide a little information about her background (real or constructed), reminding members of the focus groups about the central character in the show they were about to watch, and perhaps supporting subsequent processes of identification by these viewers. In the event, my attempted assistance had the opposite effect, disappointing and disconcerting some of the interviewees. I had inadvertently constructed a particularly problematic narrative sketch.

(It) had a very abrupt ending. [Limkokwing female student (1)]

I, I abruptly ended it! (TW)

...

I actually would like to know what she did. (laughs)  
[Limkokwing female student (1)]

...

To me it was interesting actually because I was, actually starting to get the hang (of it) ( ... ) I was hoping for more ( ... ) you just cut it like that, in fact. Oh God! [Limkokwing female student (2)]

...  
I don't think I had enough time to identify with her! (group laughter) [Limkokwing female student (2)] [( ... ) = omitted section]

Responses to the second segment raised important issues concerned with contemporary experience of "familiarity and estrangement". Electronic communication has produced a sense of "integration within globalised 'communities' of shared experience" (Giddens 1990: 140-41). In the reception of overseas programmes, the horizons of identification do not follow geographical contours. Experiencing constraints on involvement with televised "others" is not an automatic consequence of spatial separation. Rather, as Goonasekera has argued, there is a "spatial and temporal concentration and extension of social relations brought about vicariously through modern communication technology" (1996: 51). Disinterest is not synonymous with distance. At the Universiti Sains Malaysia, in their reactions to the second Oprah segment on gender and communication, people indicated it contained attitudes and actions with which they already felt acquainted. A similar stereotyping and constraint on female behaviour, they claimed, was a feature of both American and Malaysian cultures.

In one focus group at least, there was considerable involvement in this televised version of the "American everyday", in the roles and relationships of a mundane life-world which, while physically distant, was projected here on screen. The hugely disparate locations of home and overseas were forgotten, with contributors' awareness of divergent space temporarily replaced by recognising the proximity of prejudice: "I've gone through that". Here, differences were displaced to the margins by viewers who experienced a familiar practice and place. Identification can cross cultures.

I can *relate* to what she's saying. I can relate to what everybody in that audience is saying. You know because it's not only that I am, I've gone through that but people I know around me have gone through that. You see.  
[Universiti Sains Malaysia female student (2)]  
I do agree with her because in, traditionally like, traditionally here in Malaysia women are

...  
I don't think I had enough time to identify with her! (group laughter) [Limkokwing female student (2)] [( ... ) = omitted section]

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considered to be like a "weaker sex", you know. It's in our tradition, *but they're trying to break out of it*. [Universiti Sains Malaysia male student (3)]

On the other hand, since cultures can detail very particular conceptions of appropriate behaviour, defining rules and rituals, recognising life-styles has its limits. Another student in the same group argued that a programme's credibility is a result of viewers finding that it draws on a culturally specific "context" (student) of which those viewers are already aware (or in which they could be said to be already "players"). Television content which closely follows (albeit extending) their everyday lives is accredited with "reality".

The quotidian specificities of life-worlds overseas displayed in *Oprah* were experienced by this contributor, not as an extension of her everyday life, but as evidence of a world apart, with which identification was constrained by "culture differences", a "wall".

But I am aware of the culture differences when I watch the show. If I were to watch, let's say, the topic being discussed by Mahadzir Lokman in *Global*, the *same* topic, and the same topic in *Oprah Winfrey* I would believe what is said in Mahadzir's show would be more *real* to me than what is said in Oprah's show, because her context is American. ...

(We) don't have to now *practice* what they practice, we know there's a difference in our culture and their culture. ( ... ) (We) don't have to necessarily believe that it's a hundred percent true for *us*. [Universiti Sains Malaysia female student (1)]

ii. "identification" as a conceptual geography for investigation

Here, I shall confine myself to remarks intended to illustrate the usefulness of thinking about the "play of identifica-

tion" when accounting for viewers' reception of programmes. These comments are intended to locate my approach within the recent history of (Western) audience studies (cf. Moores 1993).

Oprah, as I have noted, clearly occupies central-stage in her shows, exerting a presence and power which mobilises audience identification with her discourses of prescription and persuasion. "She is in control of what is being said, the topics that are going to be talked about" [student (1)] In the third segment, the social psychologist who attacks talkshows is loudly marginalised by host and audience. Yet real viewers can resist the onslaught, identifying not with the host but with the harassed. Here, the show's "hierarchy of discourses" is inverted by a female student at USM, who aligns herself with the psychologist.

Sometimes it's a bit frustrating to watch when, if I'm the speaker, OK, I'm from the audience and I'm speaking, and (interruption by another member of the focus group!) people don't let me finish whatever I am saying (laughs), you know. (...) (The social psychologist) has to, like, keep on reminding "Don't shout at me! Don't shout at me!", you know what I mean? (...) So I think you should give a chance for the person to be able to finish her sentence *before* they bombard her with other things [Universiti Sains Malaysia female student (2)].

Identification can be said to be with another's narrational journey or performance of a social role, here the (would-be) public speaker. [Student (2), incidentally, is taking public relations or "persuasive communication"]. Sharing in this articulation, or "management", of a social role means aligning oneself with another's interests. It is to acknowledge (if not also to accept) the prescriptive advice or persuasive information addressed to the incumbent of the role "on display": "Don't shout at me! Don't shout at me!"

Finally in this section, I want to draw attention to a criticism of talkshows which surfaced in the third segment. The television critic from the Washington Post newspaper, an "ex-

pert" panelist on the show, attacked them as excessively "individualist", as reducing political, social and economic concerns to dilemmas experienced by individuals. (This is a reductionist aesthetics evident in many films and television dramas, at least in the West).

these shows emphasise so much the self at the expense of everything else. I mean suddenly we're no longer a society, we're no longer a country, we're just a collection of selves and all these selves have these terrible problems that they come on and talk about in public.

#### 4. *L.A. Law* : Legislation and Life-worlds

I conclude this essay with a short analytical account of Malaysian viewers watching American television drama. I shall "foreground" further the relationship between identification and play demonstrated in talkshows - using the heuristic metaphors of "playing away from home" and "bringing meaning back home". Here, I seek to integrate the language of hermeneutic theory with the self-reflexive description of their activities by real viewers. In doing so, I rely on contributions from the 1995 focus groups at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, and in Kuala Lumpur, who were productively involved in the early stages of this research.

With the luck of the earnest beginner, the UKM investigation of audience responses to US popular television drama was a fortuitous anticipation of the 1996 USM research. The same methodology was involved. During the weekend of 11th and 12th February, 1995, the author, two research assistants, fifteen UKM students and twenty-two citizens of Kuala Lumpur viewed (and later discussed in focus groups) a one hour compilation of extracts from American television drama and Malaysian mid-evening news reports. The US programmes, both of which had been transmitted on Malaysian television, were *L.A. Law* (11pm, Channel Three, Thursday February 9th, 1995) and *Good Advice* (11.30pm, Channel Two, Wednesday February 8th, 1995).

The *L.A. Law* segment contained, amongst other narrative sketches, the story of a struggle over child custody. This tale produced puzzlement, the uncertainty of its resolution heightened amongst an audience who here saw only an extract.

The "case is quite interesting, where, I would like to know what is the ending of it. I feel I *want* to know what is the ending of it" [UKM female student (1)]

Goal-directed rather than cursory in their attention, involved viewers seek a coherent tale. They play with meaning, moving around the "field" of the text, shifting the focus of their interest back and forth, concentrating on different aspects of a programme. An involved audience remembers earlier events in a story, using these recollections in anticipating likely eventualities, finding evidence to overcome uncertainties. They project a diegetic, or narrative, future, perhaps generating in turn (as in responses to Hitchcock films) concern for a character's fate.

To return to the language of phenomenology, viewers' awareness of programme content is both "retentive" (backward-looking) and "protensive" (future-directed). Anticipating what may happen in a drama, audiences seek to resolve uncertainties, assisted in their doing so by remembering the course of events in similar cases. In a flexible and speculative consideration of hypotheses, they play with enigmas: involved viewers attempt to provide sense where otherwise it is absent, completing the "hermeneutic circle" (Gadamer) of meaning.

A narrative outcome may be already known (perhaps on the basis of information provided in a pre-credit sequence, as in the *LA Law* extract with which this section is concerned). In such instances, hermeneutic speculation concerns details of the plot's resolution, *how* the ending is attained. To play in this game of assembling meaning is to play away from home, to be distracted from domesticity.

Viewers' playful involvement in a programme normally presupposes that they experience the direction of its events, its "story-line", as plausible. As I noted in section 3(i), credibility is a function of coherence (in the last instance) with everyday life. But an audience seeking an easy distraction by television comedy's frequent celebration of the incredible and extraordinary may have to forget "normal" standards of reasonable (and therefore intelligible) behaviour. Here, viewing pleasure demands that a story's initiating, if unlikely, assumptions be granted. To watch one of the other *L.A. Law* stories in the extract shown at UKM was to view an engrossing and entertaining, if absurd, tale of a woman librarian who dressed in Victorian costume and fainted whenever a colleague swore. It



was to be confronted by behaviour which "don't make sense" [UKM female student (1)], an unlikely premiss which nevertheless enabled the emergence of entertaining incongruity.

The librarian's story and similar comedic episodes defy integration into everyday life. Nevertheless, an easy and pleasurable resolution of this, and similar epistemological problems, can be bought by viewers at the cost of temporarily suspending their conviction that the possible is restricted to the accustomed. Comedy refuses to limit itself to the plausible (in the interest of humorously exploring the implausible). Enjoyably involved in the consequences, an audience's anticipation (or "horizon of expectation") must be that comedy's dramatic dislocation of the world will be for the moment, fun.

Involvement in watching television, like enthusiastic commitment to a game, interrupts the tedium of everyday (mundane) existence. It is a brief, if sometimes compelling, distraction, an absorption in another "reality". The ludic (or play-like) activity of viewing is an opportunity to switch off/switch on to a different life-world - a televisually mediated place and time which (as I observed at the outset) is always also in some respects familiar, is not *too* different.

Like participating in a game, audiences enjoy involvement in a programme. A happily concluding romance brings pleasure to its audience, "a nice feeling in us after watching it" [UKM female student (1)]. *Serious-minded* play is appropriate to both. Viewer interest is not only in coherent narratives, the sustaining pleasure of securely resolved conclusions. As in other play, audiences direct their attention to establishing formulae for success in games elsewhere, abstracting prescriptions from a programme for guidance in everyday living. Responding to the situation comedy *Good Advice*, one student conveyed her dissatisfaction: "nothing serious there, you know, for me to *think*, you know. I cannot think anything there, just laugh, that's all" [UKM female student (2)].

Playing with/in the content of a programme, an audience establishes significance, both for the text and for life beyond television. "The subject that interested me most (in *L.A. Law*) was the, eh, the way the lawyers do it" [UKM male student (1)]. Aligning himself or herself with characters, a viewer infuses their sensibilities into the practice of everyday living. In this play of appropriation, meaning is *brought back home*. "Being very open, you know (as in *Good Advice*). I think it happens

in Malaysia, too, actually, like actually it happened, ah, I did it!" [UKM female student (2)].

Identifying with textual *personae*, the mind is "at play". In identification, viewers both align themselves with characters' persuasive perceptions of the world, and move to translate the latter's practical insights or ethics into action. Focus group participants showed how, in identifying, television's viewers carry meaning everywhere. Noting the librarian's Victorian dress in *L.A. Law*, a UKM communication certificate student abstracted the universal maxim: "You don't have to be like other people. You can be who you want to be." [UKM female student (3)].

The "essence" of a "world-affecting" identification is ludic. This is the playfulness both of absenting oneself from everyday realities, and of subsequently "returning home", domesticating the sense of a programme in "writing" its message across life-worlds of experience.

"I don't (think) I'm able to identify with the individuals shown (in the sex comedy, *Good Advice*). Definitely not. Definitely not similar to mine." [UKM female student (4)]. Where it does occur, the experience of identification results from recognising similarity. Occasionally implausible to all but the person concerned, such recognition can presuppose a creative, often very selective perception of a programme by the viewer. Reconstituting the sexually dissolute in *Good Advice*, the certificate student (referred to above) indicated her ethical reading of the plot. In an account of identification which emptied the occasion of its sexual overtones, she claimed that, like the character Jack who would not go home unaccompanied, "there are times when you just forfeit everything and *be there* for a fellow friend" [UKM female student (3)].

## 5. Conclusion: Global Narrowcasting

What does it mean to reach out and touch someone on the Internet?

(Tafler 1995: 236)

I'm suggesting that the processes of identification, then, need to be specified as a pre-requisite of describing what television audiences do. Identification is playful, establishing

meaning, involved and/or critical, creatively selective in its movements back and forth, (dis)engaging with a programme. It is my presumption, also, that it is the interactive mechanisms of identification with (and critical detachment from) what's on screen which will prompt and "patrol" player-participant experience beyond television, of the internet and CD-ROM multimedia - our exploration of *virtual communication*.

No single instrument or application fully embodies the shifting televisual climate though the word *interactive* has been increasingly thrown about

(d'Agostino and Tafler 1995: xxix).

1. The associate interviewers, without whom this research would not have taken place were: Mariah and Normah Mustaffa (UKM), Mun Yee (Limkokwing Institute of Creative Technology), Mohamed Haris and Siti Omar (USM).
2. Acknowledging the medium's generally low cultural status, in his *Television Form and Public Address*, Corner lists the following as characteristics of "watching television", of television's "particular discourses and the forms of engagement which they encourage" (169). I suggest that, while generally ascribable to television, these features are also pre-eminently defining of the talkshow, constituting it as paradigmatic (169-71): "lack of symbolic density", "dependence upon the pre-televisual", a "high level of sociability", "literalness" "emphasising its reality connections" despite a "certain 'post-modernisation' of style", and a "rhythm" of "regular and frequent moments of intensity".
3. Hoy's article ("Thomas McCarthy and contemporary critical theory") is a useful summation of conflicting views on the extent of the "consensus" presupposed (or pragmatically anticipated) in any discussion.

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Notes

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Author

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