

## The Subjects of News Television

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Of the multiplicity of television's representations of the world, none is more emblematic of it than the coverage of news events – the happenings in the real world as it unfolds day by day. Indeed it is doubtful whether the expression "the real world" had any significant currency before television, and it is almost certain that thanks to television, we now feel we have a clear idea of what it is, which means that the real world is the promised used value upon which the exchange value of the images it puts into circulation is determined. The televised world is, increasingly, the only world we know. Whether this world existed before television is not just a trick question that engages philosophers and postmodern sociologists like Baudrillard. It is relevant to ask (and it has been asked) what kind of reality television constructs for us and what consequences follow from such constructions.

Paradoxically, it is for this very reason that news television in its mundane role as a necessary supplement – a virtual accompaniment – of the diurnal cycle, is not a very popular topic of research. It does feature in mass communications research as a site for the investigation of audience responses, but the distribution of research methods across the televisual menu is revealing: entertainment television attracts both textual studies and audience research, whereas with news, it is either audience research or a more mass-culture theory based investigation of the politics of representation increasingly focused on questions of the production of reality. Thus it is television's power to produce events, to turn real events into televisual events, that has seen some of the most interesting research in recent years. The first Gulf War was a particularly important moment in the development of this strain of television studies, but other events that have been demonstrated to have been substantially televisual in nature include the Tiananmen Square massacre, Bosnia, and of course, the 9/11 bombings.

By contrast the television news programme as a textual form has not attracted much attention. There are of course the early studies by Brunson and Morley, Lewis and others<sup>[1]</sup> which are valuable investigations of the strategies of framing and stratification employed in news programmes, which have not changed substantially in the last 20 years, since the first of these studies were undertaken. Work by Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, bearing on similar issues should also be cited for the enduring insights they provide into the nitty gritty of television's representation of reality. In these studies, the question of ideology features in its classical form as one of subtle inflections of 'objective' reportage which contribute to the privileging of dominant perspectives. The choice of visuals, the relations of dependence and authority between voice and image, the recourse to expert knowledge and other strategies of fashioning the news and giving it the appearance of

objectivity, neutrality or impartiality have been investigated in detail. This is complemented by the study of audiences, where research has shown the variability of individual responses, the possibility and actuality of reading against the grain of dominant ideological framing of news. Another dimension studied by sociologists and media experts among the public intelligentsia is the ethics of journalistic practice. When the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu turned his attention to the workings of news television<sup>[2]</sup>, he approached it in a somewhat classical fashion as a public institution with a mandate to report on the world and help the viewers make sense of it - an institution the ethics of whose practice were well laid out, but which did not always live up to its own proclaimed ideals. Bourdieu deals with the routine practices of news and current affairs programmes and draws a sociological portrait of the journalistic community, revealing the tribal mentality that dominates the institution. Bourdieu's concern is not so much the ontological and epistemological issues arising from television's claim to present the world as it is, but with the institutional dimensions of the practice of news broadcasting, the sub-field of televisual journalism as it has concretized into an institution with its own internal protocols and codes of achievement - how for instance, a journalist's sense of achievement derives from having scooped a rival channel, rather than the substance of the scoop itself. To Brunson and Morley's investigation of the relation between different voices and visual elements employed in the news, Bourdieu brings a concern with the actual social relations between newsmakers, news presenters and experts. It is not only a question of discursive hierarchies - the anchor's discourse dominating the proceedings and slotting the reporter and expert in their respective places - but also the actual pecking order among experts, between anchors themselves, and between these two orders.

Thus the two important and widely prevalent modes of television research are (1) sociology and social psychology and (2) cultural texts and processes. The subfields include programme analysis, policy debates, production studies and audience research.

In raising the question of the subjects of news television, my aim is to bring into focus, in a very preliminary fashion, another dimension of news television that neither of these paradigms has managed to capture. The attempt is to draw attention to the narrative, dramatic and performative dimensions of a news channel's programming-everything that contributes to making it more than a platform for the dissemination of news and information. The question of the subject is tied to the problem of identifications-from brand identification (allegiance to a particular channel), to identification with news anchors, specific programmes, or more generally to the overall community effect that each channel strives to produce. This can also be thought of as a question of form, extending beyond the generic formal properties associated with television news coverage, into the specifics of a sort of secondary elaboration that gives to any news programme, and the news channel, a distinctive identity.

A news television brand \_ how is this to be conceived? It is not enough to say that there is a growing trend of infusion of entertainment values into news reportage - that much is evident enough. But beyond this, there is a sustained production of the figure of the news and views consumer \_ a subject of news television \_ who must be drawn into a dramatic production whose performative functions remain stable from day to day while the content of the drama changes everyday. News television thus offers a combination of constant and variable factors: roughly, the elements of form are constant, while the content is variable by definition. Only events of extraordinary importance - natural disasters, war, terrorist attacks \_ where content exceeds form (and provokes frantic attempts to recover formal control), will disrupt this stability. At other times, even the variable content of each day's news programme is subjected to a working over that will strive to at once highlight the novelty of the information and confine its reception to the stable parameters of the diurnal cycle which the programme form tries to mimic. To what extent is this form itself the primary draw for a viewer of news programmes? That is one of the questions that will concern us here.

In his essay on the 'Technics of the Medium'<sup>[3]</sup>, Stuart Hall draws attention to the apparent predominance of the *channel* function over the *medium* function in television. By this he means that television seems to be dominated by actuality content which appears to be merely transmitted. By contrast to the cinema, or even an intermediate form like the documentary film (in which the medium function is dominant), Hall points out that television seems to us not so much to *explore* reality as *reproduce* it. While there is substantial truth in this observation, the expansion of television in the 35 years since Hall's essay was written has introduced a new element into the experience of news television in particular and television in general. For today, the news channel is itself a third determining instance in addition to the 'channel' and medium functions. This new function may appear to be akin to the medium function in so far as news channels claim to not only present the news but also to analyze and interpret it. But where such analyses or interpretation is offered, it is offered separately in programmes designed for debate and analysis, and does not affect the news report as such, which must continue to appear to be transmitting information and images of actuality. The news channel presents itself as another kind of unit, larger than any particular news programme but at the same time a distinctive entity within the general economy of news dissemination. The historic turn (probably dating back to the launch of CNN), that calls for a reconsideration of news television is this: the channel is the unit that counts for most in today's scenario, more so than an individual programme in particular or news reporting in general. The emergence of this intermediate entity (which has proved to be a development of enormous significance in India, which has seen a rash of news channels coming up in a matter of a few years in almost all major languages) in the era of globalization (which is universally associated with the decline of the nation-state's autonomy) signals a reorientation of the viewer's position vis-à-vis the world.

This development can be better understood when seen in the light of the current media-saturated environment where the news is no longer a scarce commodity. In the not so distant past, there was a punctuality to the average citizen's encounter with the news of the world. The advent of the news channel signals the demise of the strictly social-symbolic character of news reading or viewing as a daily activity. The morning paper (and the same could be said of the nine o'clock news) no longer has the function of reproducing the imagined community of the nation that Benedict Anderson attributed to it. The news channel runs for 24 hours, its coverage thus aspiring to a kind of Borgesian coincidence with reality itself. While it is true that the news is variously processed to fit into an array of programmes, visually the contemporary news channel is a screen seething with the liveness of stock prices, live temperatures, breaking news, the time and other perishable information. Amidst these waxing and waning indices of a world in perpetual information-producing motion, as if jostled by them and struggling to maintain its position at the centre, is the face of the anchor.

Thus we need to revise our understanding of the medium and channel functions as explained by Hall. There the term 'channel function' designated the neutrality-effect that accompanies our perception of news events on television. Events appear to be simply 'channelled' to us without any processing according to the established conventions of a medium. 'Medium function' on the other hand refers to those effects specific to television as a medium, its work of processing. With the advent and rise to domination of the news channel, we discern a significant shift in this respect. Now television news is disseminated by channels aspiring to be news brands. In developing such news brands, channels need to operate on several different planes at once: the studio and screen design, the anchors and their personalities, the language of reporting, the specific mix of 'news and views' that it wishes to project as its own ('No views, just the hard news', or 'Not just news but also analysis to help you understand it'), etc. The old 'channel function' still remains at the core, even as the 'channel' is now the site of elaboration of a series of new 'medium functions': the news channel still promises to present us with the news as it happens. But this very promise now harbours a more ambitious claim deriving from the news brand principle, which can be the source of further competition between channels.

For it is not only a question of being there when the 'news breaks', but of breaking the news oneself. Being present when the news breaks is still a question of following what is conventionally, more or less consensually regarded as the news. For this one needs to position reporters in all the right places: the parliament, the assemblies, the ministerial offices, the police press room etc. But to break the news oneself, one needs to be present in all kinds of unconventional places, constantly rubbing the lamp as it were, until the news breaks out of it and promises to serve you alone. Sometimes on television one catches a glimpse of such delightful scenes of news breaking. During the last general election (elections are usually a time of news break epidemics, channels will put out anything that comes their way, knowing that

even if most of it turns out to be dubious, nobody is going to remember it in the midst of the campaign frenzy), NDTV's intrepid Barkha Dutt was interviewing Sharad Pawar when an Aaj Tak reporter tried to butt in. For the next few minutes, there was a tussle between the two, with Barkha appealing to Pawar to help by declaring that "this is an NDTV interview". Pawar didn't oblige, leaving Barkha and her camera man to fight the battle by themselves. Eventually the intruder was driven away.

When the news is not gathered from the conventional places, the question of news value itself comes to be redefined. If your 'breaking story' has to work, you need something that defines it as news: either your story has to be instantly recognizable as news (at the very minimum by the rest of the journalist community), or you should be able to sell it as news to some set of viewers. When India TV recently investigated the so-called 'casting couch scandal' it was taking a risk on both counts, but hoping that it will succeed in the latter sense. While the story got very little approval from the journalists, the viewers' response remains a mystery, partly because India TV's viewership itself is as yet not so clearly defined. But if you look at India TV's run of 'exposes' (the previous one was of politicians engaging in paid sex in hotel rooms), it would seem that it is trying to pitch its stories somewhere between the lower middle-class moral brigade in the Hindi belt and the more durable low-end sleaze and political satire market (previously catered to by such publications as *Hindu Nation* at one extreme and *Blitz* and *Current* at the other, more respectable, end). But this is also a sign of the difficulty a new channel faces in breaking into the television news market (where in Hindi, Aaj Tak, Star News and Zee News, all backed by powerful media empires, are already well-established). Scoops and investigative reports are the traditional ways of drawing viewers and hoping that they will stay on. But in addition, the channels now aspire to a brand image that will function as a more durable point of identification for viewers. India TV's attempts in this regard are telling, even if they turned out to be pathetic. One of the hoardings of its pre-launch ad campaign showed Rajat Sharma, Maneka Gandhi and Tarun Tejpal together, with the slogan 'Desh badal na ho to channel badlo' (Tejpal seems to have subsequently backed out of the venture). Barkha Dutt's adventures in Kargil were exploited by NDTV for augmenting its own image. While some of this kind of image-building may also be found in newspapers, what is unique to television is the visual and narrative elaboration of reporters and anchors as personalities. Thus NDTV team for instance, were featured in a promo, where each of them was assigned an individual quirk and a shining journalistic skill ('a bad cook; a fine investigative reporter', etc.).

What we are looking at here, especially in so far as the history of Indian television is concerned, is the transition from state monopoly of news television to the advent of news as capitalist commodity. In the era of state television, the subject of the news was the state-citizen. This model itself can take more than one form in practice: the most obvious comparison we can draw here is between the BBC and Doordarshan as two forms of state

television. The difference between the two can be stated as the difference between state television and government television. Doordarshan is more accurately defined as government television rather than state television. Employing Foucault's contrastive terms, we could say that Doordarshan has functioned as an institution of governmentality, rather than an emblem of citizens' sovereignty. The head of Doordarshan once made a public announcement that henceforth DD would try to appear independent and objective, whereby he not only admitted that it had never been that, but also implied that it was mainly a question of appearance. The BBC's constitution reflects the idea that only the state-citizen - as separate from both the government of the day and private capitalist interests - can guarantee the independence of a mass medium, and its freedom from particular interests. So in theory does DD, but in practice it has proved to be much more vulnerable to the particular interests of the governments in power as well as those of private capital. This is what explains the fact that the DD news programme was and remains an exercise in ventriloquism: the subject of the news is elsewhere, the news readers do not report the news, they read it out. They do not have enunciative power, they are like those traditional message-bearers who had to convey orally, without any loss of accuracy, a message consigned to them by their employers. They are the bearers of readymade statements. Not surprisingly, news readers on DD turned out to be masters of pronunciation rather than enunciation.<sup>[4]</sup>

"The subject of the news is elsewhere." Here we are not talking about what the news is about, so much as who is relaying the news, whose subjective position the selection and formulation of the news story is anchored in. This subject, as far as Doordarshan is concerned, is the state. (Although the government of the day imposes its interests upon news content, the enunciative subject is still the state: the message seems to come from that transcendent entity in its role as mediator between the citizens and the world.) By contrast, on private television channels, the subjects (and they are multiple) seem to be all there, in the studio. While Doordarshan news imposes a sort of sacrificial paradigm upon the newsreader, forcing her to efface herself in the service of a greater power, the private channels seem to deploy a paradigm of enjoyment.<sup>[5]</sup> On such channels, the anchor appears to function as our own representative in the field of the Other, mindful of our interests, our likes and dislikes, fears and hopes. They are people like us, and even when they appear to be close to power, they seem to be carrying our mandate. In the midst of all the chaos and confusion that a typical selection of a day's news might produce in us, we remain 'anchored' to the face in the middle of the screen, and to the reporters whom s/he deploys across the territory: they not only report from the field, but are also available to answer questions, our questions.

In what way does the rise of the channel as a news-bearing entity constitute a new stage in the history of the relation between television and the masses? We can try to work towards an answer by posing another very simple, even naïve question: Why do we not think of television as a technology for the

mass dissemination of video? Imagine a situation like the following: there are many channels, each with 24 hours worth of broadcast time. Each channel bears a number, by which it is identified: Channel 1, C2, C3, ...C49...Cn. There are also video producers, who independently produce videos: films, news programmes, commentary, satire, comedy, whatever. There could conceivably be several ways in which these video producers could then get air time for their productions: allotment by lottery, first-come-first-served, auctioning of air-time, etc. Having secured a spot on say C23, a producer could then advertize the video and announce the channel and time of broadcast. Viewers would scan the day's offerings, much as they do with movies running in a city's cinema halls, and choose what they want to watch. Perhaps they could even be charged for it: the technology certainly exists. What is different about this kind of scenario is that here there are no branded channels, the marketable commodities are the individual video productions, not the channels themselves. What we now call television would then be more of an exhibition facility.

There is nothing inherently absurd about such a scenario, even if it seems so to us, accustomed as we are to a completely different, and completely naturalized, idea of what television is. In the history of television, the technology, in its *potential* form, was never placed before the public, it was not available for experimentation. From the beginning, the state and capital separately or jointly, colonized television for the goal of mass communication. From the beginning, it was regarded as a medium of communication, rather than as a facility for dissemination. In other words, even before any message was communicated through television, the *idea* of a communication loop was already in place. There was a Subject that wanted to communicate with its subjects. Television communicates: this is the first principle on which the current televisual spread is founded. Thus out of a combination that, strictly speaking, could be described as video+mass dissemination, political and economic interests in conjunction created a new entity called television, which immediately assumed the enunciative position. Programmes on television thus have an irreducibly dual quality: unlike cinema, where the individuality of a film is foregrounded and the cinematic apparatus remains in the background, 'television' - the apparatus - dominates the relationship between it and the programmes it hosts.

There is a certain founding fiction of 'access' that operates behind the world of television. In this fiction, the individual citizen is deemed to desire access to the world at large: s/he wants to know what's going on in the world out there, to feel connected. Television then comes as the answer: it will provide such access, it will bring the world into the citizen's home. The branded channel emerges within this two-point circuit as a specification of television's answering gesture: it breaks up this response into a number of distinctive responses, so many channels.

To communicate is also to bring into being a community. The loop of communication was always accompanied by the loop of community. Look at

all the experiments with community television: why on earth would a community want to produce its own programmes and watch them? What kind of idea of self-sufficiency of groups is involved in this line of thinking? But beyond such experiments, which were in any case short-lived, there remains the fact that television generates a community effect by the fact of its existence: it signals the mutual reachability of the people and the state. Indeed what is state television if not a perpetual teleconference between the state and all its subjects? In this sense, the head of state's address to the nation is the most emblematic of television's offerings. Here the communicative intent is achieved in its pure form: the Subject addresses the subjects. In other areas, something like the imaginary scenario outlined above does exist at least partially: there are independent producers who make films and buy air time for them by raising sponsorship money from advertisers.

But such instances are embedded within the larger communication logic. It is this paradigm of communication which lies behind the emergence of the channel as the primary televisual entity. Communication is not about any particular message, it is simply about the possibility of communication. To communicate, one does not need to have a message. Communication is that redundant circulation of signifiers that is necessary for the survival of the community. In J.P. Dutta's *L.O.C.*, one of the soldiers receives a letter from his wife, which he promptly puts in his pocket. When his friend asks him if he isn't going to read the letter, he replies, "No, I know what she has said" and goes on to list the contents: news about their son, parents, question as to when he will return, etc. This scene captures the truth about communication. The letter is not the product of an individual's creative efforts - which must be disseminated, i.e., read, before its truth is revealed - but a ritual posting which sustains the relationship.

Proceeding from the reality of private ownership of channels, let us construct another scenario: although some channels do produce some of their own programmes, many television channels procure programmes from independent producers or big production companies. In some cases (this is almost standard with regional language channels), channels rent out time to producers. Where such trends prevail, we can still conceive a channel as an exhibition facility controlled by small capitalists or time-lords (to coin a term). From here if we move towards those channels whose channel-image is overwhelmingly present in all its programmes, where all programmes are subsumed under the overall channel-image, we observe the following: what a channel can call its own (even when all its programmes are outsourced), is that time between shows where it elaborates an entire discourse of liveness. This of course includes the advertising, but also the announcements, the live information that fills the screen, and other elements. It is in the dimension of liveness, then, that channel ownership comes into its own as a capitalist enterprise, instead of remaining a form of time-lordism. News channels of course are 'live' through and through, they do not face the problem of the formal autonomy of fictional content, which introduces a temporal lag into

the stream of liveness, which has to be then covered over by the liveness strategies of entertainment television. One could propose a broad thesis that channels - whether news or other - aspire to maximize their live content. The innovations in television programmes - sitcoms, soaps, chat shows etc., - are all governed by this logic. News is live, news reading is a live activity (no matter that sometimes the programmes are pre-recorded). Liveness is the essential feature that sustains the teleconferencing model of televisual communication.<sup>[6]</sup>

Liveness invokes the awareness of community. But the channels also require the community's physical presence, to buttress their identity. The people's participation agenda of today's television helps solve the problem of its journalistic mandate, by taking on the task of representing community. The redundancy of communication is nowhere more apparent than in the way 'the people' are brought into the studios to speak. Thus news television seems to be driven by a specific kind of community interest - defined as interest in livelihood and social peace - far more so than the other kind that is associated with journalism - vigilance on behalf of the citizen. Every channel constantly invites the viewers to share their views, programmes are built around viewers' comments (eg., You Decide on NDTV), live shows with 'the people' present constitute a significant proportion of prime time news television. In these efforts we can see the attempt to put in place the loop of community, to attract subjective involvement in news analysis as the collective task of the anchors, the experts and the ordinary people. The enjoyment involved in such participatory rituals are not quite in the same league as what was apparently sought to be achieved in Britain by the provision for 'public access'.<sup>[7]</sup> Access, according to Corner, "is the avoiding or the correcting of imbalances in broadcasting's representation of politics and society by the articulation of a diversity of 'directly' stated views from different sections of the public and by the reflection, again 'directly', of the real diversity of cultural, social and economic circumstances, particularly those which require attention and action" (Corner 167).

In other words, access is a matter of policy, a way of putting in place correctives to the monopolistic situation that tends to prevail in national televisual environments. People get access to air time to give alternative opinions on matters of topical interest, to draw attention to matters that are neglected by commercial or state television, and in other ways provide a voice to the viewers to express themselves. By comparison with this idea, the interest that commercial television in India shows in 'people's participation' is of a different order altogether. Here the people are invoked not so much in their capacity as individuals, but collectively as a Subject: *You Decide*; *Janata ki Adalat*, the 'audience round' in various discussion-format programmes all mobilize the Collective Subject even when they call upon individuals in the audience to speak. Opinion polls pose the most absurd questions for the people to vote on, questions that cannot be answered without specialised knowledge in the field: questions of knowledge are posed as questions of opinion.

All this works because the viewers themselves are interested in and respond to the Subject effect that television seeks to produce. The loop of community is today most effectively realized by the interpellation of subjects with an economic profile - where the reproduction of life, maintaining one's economic position, improving it, surviving, constitutes a societal optimum, a state of equilibrium. News television thus interprets the news of the day from the point of view of this subject who desires equilibrium. News television is inhospitable to any other way of conceiving community, such as a community with a collective mission. Thus the market, the most volatile and anarchic of societal forces, is also the one that generates today the strongest community-effect. There is no corresponding community of citizens to match its power.

One final point can be made about the new subjects fashioned by commercial news television in India: with alarming consistency, news channels seem to invoke the viewing subject as someone who knows about and enjoys the spectacle of (political) corruption. In this regard, it has to be said that Prannoy Roy and Rajdeep Sardesai in particular have taken this winking relationship with the viewer to new heights. In the NDTV's studio, the politician is a figure already condemned, but not for that reason unloved. The primary pleasure of watching the premier English language news channel is that we can participate with the anchors in distancing the politician as an agreeable problem to be dealt with. This is a renewable pleasure, and it is renewed everyday. All we have to do as viewers is to resign ourselves to the fact of corruption and sit back and enjoy, as our men on screen rag the uncomfortable politicians. This is the subject position that is most widely available for the Indian news-viewer to occupy. Those who do not have the cultural capital to occupy this position, are the ones targeted by the moral fervour of India-TV style exposes, where the viewer is a mobilized subject.

Thus we discern at least two subject positions, immanent and transcendent, two ways of enjoying the news. News for the dominant, news for the dominated, each coming with its own distinctive subject positions and intellectual, moral and political supplements.

## **References**

[1](#) Charlotte Brunsdon and David Morley, 'Linking and framing in popular television journalism' and Justin Lewis, 'Decoding television news', both in John Corner and Silvia Harvey eds, *Television Times: A Reader*. London: Arnold, 1996. 11-22; 40-52.

[2](#) Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, New York: The New Press, 1996.

[3](#) Stuart Hall, 'Technics of the Medium', extract from 'Television as a medium and its relation to culture', report to UNESCO, 1971. Reprinted in John Corner and Silvia Harvey eds. *Television Times: A Reader*. London: Arnold, 1996. 3-10.

[4](#) While this remains largely true of the news programme, there are other news-based programmes on Doordarshan anchored by independent journalists or featuring invited discussants, which manage to treat certain topics in greater depth than other private satellite channels.

[5](#) To use a contrast elaborated in another context by Alain Badiou. See 'The Subject of Art', in *The Symptom 6* (on-line journal).

[6](#) For an early discussion of the issues involved in liveness, see Jane Feuer, 'The Concept of Live Television: Ontology vs. Ideology', in E. Ann Kaplan ed. *Regarding Television*. Los Angeles". American Film Institute/University Publications of America: 1983. 12-22. See also M. Madhava Prasad, 'Television and the National Culture' in *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 32/33; pp.119-130.

[7](#) See John Corner, 'Mediating the ordinary: the "access" idea and television form', in Corner and Harvey eds. *Television Times: A Reader*. London: Arnold, 1996. 165-174.