

PERCEPTIONS OF A 'PARTNERSHIP PRESS' : AN AUDIENCE RECEPTION STUDY (1995 & 2000) OF MALAYSIAN TELEVISION NEWS

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ABSTRACT

European philosophy and Malaysian practice can illuminate each other. Using Habermas' Critical Theory of the assumptions we make in communicating with others, this article examines the degree to which Malaysian television news is seen to be appropriately constructed by its intended audiences of Chinese, Indians, Malays and other ethnic groups. They conclude that screen journalism should be comprehensible and concentrate on viewers' interests.

INTRODUCTION

Exhibiting the interplay between media, culture and society requires reception studies, investigative accounts of viewers' responses to television. It is particularly important to gain insight into audience activity involving discussion and making sense of news content (Dahlgren and Sparks, 1991). Here, these processes are considered in a complex, multi-cultural modern Asian society, Malaysia. Using Habermas' Critical Theory of the assumptions we make in communicating with others (1984), I examine the degree to which Malaysian television news is seen to be appropriately constructed by its intended audiences of Chinese, Indians, Malays and other ethnic groups. It must be comprehensible and concentrate on viewers' interests.

People are sometimes assumed to be most interested in 'who's killing who today!' (Chinese/Malay female, University of Malaysia Sarawak, 2000). Television's role is educative as well as entertainment-oriented, functions which can conflict, distancing audiences in criticism of content.

Subsequently, I consider 'ideal speech' in the public sphere (Habermas, 1989, 1992). Critical Theory argues for the need to allow a pluralism of perspectives to be discussed on television and elsewhere. Within Malaysian audience contributions, a distinction is made between their perceptions of institutional 'propaganda' and their realisation that news texts (programmes) always express a political perspective whether in Asia or the West.

On Radio Television Malaysia's TV2 News, 'they want to show to us how stable is our country', the issue of stability is 'very, very hot, like *goreng pisang!*' (Melanau female student, University of Malaysia Sarawak, 2000)²

COMMUNICATION, COMPREHENSIBILITY AND AUDIENCE INTERESTS

Reading this article, you assume I am attempting to make sense and sincerely trying to convey true information. Habermas considers such beliefs in his Theory of Communicative Action. Poole and others develop these ideas, arguing that in speaking to people one is at the same time implicitly making accompanying validity claims: that one is comprehensible, asserting truth, and sincere (1989, p.19).

Associating himself with this Critical Theory account of communication, Alasuutari writes of how in conversation people assume that participants are generally following cooperative maxims. These require 'us to avoid unfamiliar language' and contribute with validity and relevance (1997, p.8). If these principles are not followed more often than not, human interaction would become impossible.

In the more public arena of media communication, a similar consensus on practice can be said to inform television's reception by viewers. Content is assumed for the most part to be assembled 'altruistically' - to be as accurate as possible, to address presumed audience interest, and to be comfortably comprehensible for intended viewers. Who would deliberately switch on a boring, unintelligible, misinformed news programme?

Directly addressing studio cameras, news presenters intend to be read by audiences at home as sincerely truthful. Swiftly assembled narratives, bringing the world to people's attention, should be couched in terms appropriate to assumed viewers. Language used ought to be familiar to those presumed watching, creating (it should be said) 'an illusion of equality and closeness' (McQuail, 1997, p.118). Meaning can otherwise become opaque. Claims to intelligibility can be contested, as we shall see.

Programmes incorporate 'implicit frames or cultural premises' (Alasuutari, 1997, p.7), articulating ways of understanding the world. Such constructions (or accounts) of reality are impotent unless easily comprehended by viewers. A programme'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: the latter's texts remain enigmatic, horizons of meaning cannot be crossed. Enjoyment presupposes unproblematic programmes.

Consuming media, we develop their textual stories, making sense of limited content. Gaps in comprehension are bridged by viewers speculatively contributing meaning to television's indeterminate programmes. Sometimes 'parallel' (Jensen, 1986, p.64) narratives in sound and vision are developed, audience accounts of what is heard and seen. But eliciting and enlarging upon the details of the medium's stories presupposes a

broad base of comprehension, knowledge shared between communicators and viewers (McQuail, 1997, p.109).

Television constructs its content to ease understanding amongst those whom writers believe they are addressing. In communicating with people, being comprehensible is clearly a condition of convincing. Here I reflect on viewers' judgements about Malaysian television's capacity to 'make sense' in a multi-cultural society, with wide-ranging linguistic skills, and consequently be seen as a persuasive medium.

My research takes an 'ethnographic turn' (Schroder, 1994). After initial research with a colleague at Radio Television Malaysia in 1994, audience focus groups were held in 1995 and again in 2000/ 2001. Students at the National University of Malaysia (UKM), University of Malaya (UM) and University of Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) considered their responses to a range of English language news bulletins on commercial/ state funded Radio Television Malaysia's TV2, and commercially funded TV3 and NTV7. In 1995, non-university groups of citizens and school students also discussed the programmes in Kuala Lumpur.

The 1995 discussions (11th and 12th February, reviewed in further focus groups on 29th July) reflected on TV2 News, 8pm (30 minutes), transmitted on Thursday February 9th. Participants were shown the first fifteen minutes of the programme. The same groups also considered TV3 Evening News, 10.30pm (30 minutes), transmitted on Wednesday February 8th (the first thirteen minutes were viewed). Some American television drama was also discussed (see Wilson, 2002).

The Malaysian daily newspaper *New Straits Times* programme schedule noted that the TV2 News programme was, 'in English' (as was TV3 Evening News). Until the end of December 1994, TV2 News was broadcast in the late evening: the new mid-evening transmission has continued to the present.

Our respondents were composed of fifteen university students (on 11th February) and twenty-two school students and working people (12th February), meeting in focus groups of four people. The undergraduates joined the discussions at the university after classes, while contributors on the second day met at a city centre hotel.

All groups drew on the three major ethnic populations in West Malaysia: Chinese, Indians, and Malays. While those at the university were of mixed ethnicity, the three groups in the city were exclusively Chinese, Indian and Malay respectively. Malaysian English was spoken throughout, with the exception of the Malay group who conversed in Bahasa Malaysia.

In 2000, TV2 News and TV2's World News (8pm and midnight respectively, 11th July) were considered by two student focus groups (each with four participants) at the University of Malaysia in Sarawak (on 13th July). Ethnic representation was complex, with Bidayuh, Dayak and Melanau contributors as well as those with mixed Chinese/ Indian/ Malay and Iban parentage. All used Malaysian English.

Two months later, on 24th September, at the National University of Malaysia, ten undergraduates (three Chinese, four Indians, three Malays) discussed TV3's Nightline (midnight) and NTV7 News (midnight), transmitted on 19th and 20th September

respectively. Students were able to contribute in English or Bahasa Malaysia. Finally, on 18th January 2001, three groups of graduate students at the University of Malaya considered TV2 News (8pm) and TV3's Nightline (midnight), transmitted on 15th and 16th January. Discussion was in English, with twelve participants (four Chinese, two Indian, six Malays).

APPROPRIATELY ADDRESSING AUDIENCES

Viewers' Comprehension of Content

Television programmes (like films) belong to genres, defining audience expectations of their content (Jensen, 1986, p.119). We anticipate documentary will inform us differently from current affairs. As a type of television, news programmes extend the address of broadcasting: they are characteristically transmitted and consumed across a nation. But in multi-lingual Malaysia, news in a particular language has an intended viewer (or listener) whose identity can be more closely specified.

Different citizens have varying interests, depending on their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This is recognised in Radio Television Malaysia's programming: 'TV1 is basically, cater for the Malays. TV2, they put it to cater for those who prefer English' (Malay female, UKM, 1995).

Channels provide news coverage in alternative languages, addressing a diversity of cultural needs. Comprehension is linguistically curbed, as a (highly articulate!) female student suggested at University of Malaysia Sarawak: 'I'm not have a good background on English', 'I can't understand well English' (Melanau female, UNIMAS, 2000).

An employee of Radio Television Malaysia studying at the National University of Malaysia in 1995 argued that mid-evening English language news on TV2, or, later at night, on TV3, 'mostly' addresses:

'the foreign expatriates here, they're working here, to know what's happening in a country. We call this English news. (...) It's mostly (for) the adult viewers, these business people, politicians, you know, ambassadors and all that, so they know what's actually happening outside the country. and also inside' (Indian male, UKM, 1995) (contributor's emphasis).

Similarly reflecting on appropriate audiences for English language news, a Malay woman school teacher argued that such news programmes narrowcast to an elite. These were people with a restricted cultural capital acquired through sub-stantial education, 'since most of low education society can't understand English' (Malay female, KL, 1995).

A group of Chinese students at an English language college in Kuala Lumpur expressed the same opinion about assumed viewers for TV2 News. Some women participants added being 'lazy' to the characteristics of this audience for television journalism, with viewers regarded as refugees from the newspapers:

TV2 News' intended audience is 'the white collar people. ["Yeh" (Chinese females, KL, 1995)] Because they can understand English' (Chinese males, KL, 1995). It is for people

who are '(very lazy?), to read about the news. They just listen to it' (Chinese females, KL, 1995).

Five years later, when compared with TV3's use of 'more simple English' on its Nightline programme, TV2 News continued to be regarded as demanding, albeit transmitted at a 'very appropriate time' (Indian female, UM, 2001). The former's language was 'more familiar to the audience', 'we can really capture whatever they say'.

Radio Television Malaysia's programme, on the other hand, was both 'formal' and 'fast' in its presentation. These were characteristics which constituted a 'barrier' for the 'audience to understand all about the news' amongst those for whom 'English is only our second language' (Chinese female, UM, 2001). 'Overseas news' was 'quite tough' to understand (Indian female, UM, 2001).

A programme's transmission time clearly influences who will be likely viewers. 'Prime time News (at 8pm) and Nightline (at midnight) cater to different audiences' (Malay male, UKM, 2000). In 1995, an Indian group in Kuala Lumpur disagreed about whether, partly because of scheduling, the young could be reasonably included amongst the wider Malaysian audience for news (using any of the range of languages in which Radio Television Malaysia customarily broadcasts).

In the discussion, a secondary school student supported his peers against the claims of an older film editor. The more senior figure in the focus group did not prove to be an opinion leader suppressing the dissenting voice of younger members.

'Teenagers, I don't think so, they listen to news' [Indian male, film editor, KL, 1995].

'Teenagers do watch news', out of interest [Indian male, school student, KL, 1995] (contributor's emphasis).

Five years later at the University of Malaysia in Sarawak, women students argued that the recently introduced World News on TV2 at midnight had an older (intended and actual) local audience, 'expats and locals who are still awake' (Chinese/ Malay female, UNIMAS, 2000), 'old people', 'pensioners' (female students, UNIMAS, 2000).

Comprehending a programme narrative is a more or less demanding task. Pre-existing knowledge of the issues discussed and language used clearly exerts an influence on success or failure. TV2 News is very 'summarised', 'quick information', an 'overview' for those already well informed during the day (Chinese female, UM, 2001). But the very young can be disadvantaged: 'I can't understand most of the news. I think my friends also cannot understand it' [Malay female, school student (13), KL, 1995].

Television's genres were assessed by the 1995 Malay group in Kuala Lumpur on the basis of their relative difficulty, their likely problematic content. Given a knowledge of the appropriate language, popular situation comedy, it was suggested by a female teacher, was likely to be easy to understand: 'nothing is difficult for those who understand English since (the programme) is just a sitcom' (Malay female, KL, 1995).

Others made the same judgement about news programmes (with the exception of segments dealing with business issues). In these genres, stories which resist understanding are a consequence of the viewer's ignorance rather than textual complexity. Subsequently,

in 2000, an Indian student at the National University of Malaysia argued that news programmes' generic commitment to simplicity in content extended to the language they used.

'If we can understand English, so we can understand all the news broadcasted. The news is quite easy to understand' (Malay male, security guard, KL, 1995).

'There are some parts that are difficult to understand. This is due to the (viewer's) understanding of language itself and not any other reasons' [Malay male, visiting from the Northern University of Malaysia (Universiti Utara), 1995].

'The most difficult part to understand in these programmes is business news that tells about the share market' (Malay female, teacher, KL, 1995).

'The English (news programmes) use is like direct and simple language that can be understood by any Malaysians', 'very basic journalism' (Indian female, UKM, 2000).

News programmes' comprehensible accounts of the world can be achieved in different ways. At least in reporting 'local news', NTV7 and TV3 were considered to vary in their strategies. Where the former's reporters 'put in their own views', the latter allowed 'direct statements' from politicians and others (Chinese male, UKM, 2000). Both sets of comments functioned to provide clarification for an intended audience.

'NTV7, they usually send their reporters', whereas TV3 'they will just ask the minister, what views and what action they will take, and that's all'. While TV3 'quotes what a minister states', NTV7 reporters' accounts can be 'easier to understand' (Chinese female, UKM, 2000).

TV3 'are more patriotic in terms of, they like to quote what the minister thinks, and maybe indirectly they will influence the viewers': 'the way they broadcast is, they have simplified everything, like they just ask the minister to give their point of view' (Chinese female, UKM, 2000). TV3, 'it's easier to understand for me, lah' (Chinese male, UKM, 2000) (contributor's emphasis).

As we have noted, television news like other forms of communication implicitly makes the validity claim not only to be comprehensible but to be an accurate account of the world. In securing its status as a source of 'fact', the genre needs to convince audiences of its reliability. Readers must believe in consuming news they are 'recipients of reliable, factual information' (Jensen, 1986, pp. 50,53).

Generally, Malaysian focus group responses suggested that this reputation is achieved for television news, with programmes obtaining acknowledgement of their implicit in principle commitment to truth in the public sphere. News is factual, 'the real thing' (Malay female, UKM, 1995). The genre does not exaggerate; inaccuracy is not intentional.

'News is something that they bring, what's true in Malaysia or other nationalities. They are all true news' (Indian male, school student, KL, 1995). 'The news, of course, it's real, cannot be "blown up", unless they are wrong!' (laughter) (Chinese female, UKM, 1995) 'It's news, so probably it's true, it is fact' (Chinese/ Malay male, UNIMAS, 2000)

In 2000, television news journalism incurred criticism, not for inaccuracy but for lacking investigative analysis supporting an audience's further consideration of issues. 'Our news just to report only and not to provide analysis. This is the problem, we as viewers only get the reporting. They do not do special report' (Malay male, UKM, 2000).

News, after all, is a genre 'meant for serious TV viewers' (female students, UNIMAS, 2000). TV3, it was acknowledged, carried lively discussions with "in your face" kind of interviews', 'what do people want to know?' (Chinese/ Malay male, UNIMAS, 2000).

Where television news addresses viewers appropriately, they can use their existing knowledge to successfully accomplish an integrated understanding of the programme's narratives. Coherent comprehension emerges easily as a response to the text. Such news coverage is experienced as 'straight to the point and comprehensive' (Chinese female, UKM, 2000).

Actual audiences suitably addressed by a programme report that, the 'contents were very straightforward, I did understand most of it' (Indian female, UKM, 2000). But sometimes, news seems 'hidden', 'so you have to do a lot of interpreting' (Malay female, UM, 2001). On other occasions, a business story may be difficult to understand for the uninformed, 'really blur' (Malay female, UNIMAS, 2000).

Audience comprehension of television content traces out a 'hermeneutic circle' (Gadamer, 1975) of understanding in which the information they bring to viewing is used to relate narrative part to building programme stories in their entirety (and vice-versa). Those watching add details (eg., of a location), completing an account. A viewer's knowledge may (or may not) be sufficient for this purpose. 'I think I know very well the economics issues' (Malay male, UKM, 2000). 'I slightly know about the economics' (Malay male, UKM, 2000).

In the attempt to make sense of news stories, audiences may activate narrative analogies or metaphors, creatively seeing similarities between events on screen and elsewhere. A 1995 focus group participant considered the activities of Bosnian aggressors to be animal-like.

In Boznia, 'they rape, I mean, the women - that one is something that (I) don't make sense of'. 'People are now having, I mean ... what is (an) animal's brain (...) I mean animal's attitude' (Indian male, UKM, 1995).

Programmes are criticised for inadequately supporting an audience's widely informed and integrated narrative understanding of issues. Only a 'miserable two or three items' of foreign news are considered (Indian female, UM, 2001). 'In the case of the petrol price increase, they (NTV7) should also report how this will affect other products' (Malay male, UKM, 2000). Superficial summaries were insufficient.

TV2 News, 'they only report, they don't delve into it' (Chinese/ Indian/ Malay female, UNIMAS, 2000). It 'tends to report stuff only at the fringe of the issue', on the horizon of understanding (Chinese/ Malay male, UNIMAS, 2000).

Very brief segments of information on television news may resist attempts by those watching to achieve an integrated understanding of events, to attach items to an

explanatory context in a hermeneutic circle of comprehension. TV2 News reports on developments were 'very short', with many more 'slots' in the programme than TV3's Nightline, and 'lots of issues presented' (Malay females, UM, 2001).

Successful narrative building is difficult where presenters 'just say a few things about one news and it goes to (the) next one', 'viewers are like, all lost, they (can't?) understand what's going on' (Indian female, UKM, 1995). A programme should be, 'more complete in its coverage (of) the news' (Indian male, school student, KL, 1995).

TV2's World News, 'I think they're just throwing it. I think they say, "this is interesting enough to put in the World News". OK, I want a bit of this, and a bit of this, and a bit of this. OK, we've got the World News, in fifteen minutes' (Chinese/ Indian/ Malay female, UNIMAS, 2000).

News programmes can address their audiences inappropriately. While offering them additional knowledge, content may be of no interest to viewers. From a hermeneutic perspective, narrative compilations can be so fragmented it becomes difficult for audiences to comprehend events mediated on screen as interconnected.

TV2 News 'seems to give the general public technical information, tedious information which we do not exactly need to know. We just want to know generally.' 'They don't know what else to say, they don't know what's appropriate for the audience' (Chinese/ Indian/ Malay female, UNIMAS, 2000) (contributor's emphasis).

Some suggested that TV2 had a serial form of news reporting, undermining successful communication. Narrating consecutive daily 'episodes' (each with an open and unfinished ending) of an extended story could render it indeterminate, continually uncertain. Participants distinguished this practice from TV3 News which they argued compressed a narrative (from beginning to end) into a single night's news bulletin - analogous to writing a complete story for a daily television series.

On TV3 News, 'they really go deep on the issues, they really finish off the issues'. In the case of a TV3 News item, 'it's really full, they show fully what's happening and what's going on, and they finish off' (Indian male, UKM, 1995).

Finally, it is interesting to note that while TV2 News was judged by some to lack a coherent 'flow' of items within the programme, its mid-evening place on RTM's second channel enabled it to inherit as a multi-ethnic audience those watching the preceding Hong Kong movie (a 'flow-on' of viewers):

'I was staying in the hostel in the campus, and normally, once the clock strikes seven o'clock sharp, we will all move to the hall to watch the Chinese movie. And to my surprise (...), other ethnics like Malays and very (small) minorities of the Indians do join us for that movie', 'the movie is more to ethnic-free' (Chinese female, UM, 2001) (contributor's emphasis).

Likewise, TV3's Nightline acquired early audiences anticipating the film which followed, 'they are not intending to watch the news', 'they are waiting for the film'. As Jensen argues, 'newsviewing may be a function of the time of the broadcast rather than of the specific content' (1986, p. 89). So 'the twelve o'clock news should be shorter and very

brief, about ten minutes, not half an hour': the 'eight o'clock (TV2 News) can be one hour, because we have ample time after having our dinner' (Malay female, UM, 2001).

Relevance to Viewers' Interests

'I do hate news. I do prefer love stories'
(Chinese female, UKM, 1995).

Individuals do not exercise a detached gaze over the world. Rather, people are above all practical: they pursue that which is of interest to them, items related to aspirations associated with their social roles. Television's address to audiences needs to be appropriately focussed on such interests.

More specifically, Malaysian news should comprehend the world from a local perspective, 'trying to reflect Malaysians' views on what are the main topics', what 'Malaysians focus on' (Chinese male, UKM, 2000). 'The news presenters are targeting Malaysian viewers, what Malaysians want' (Chinese male, UKM, 2000). While TV2 News considers 'very hard', 'very serious' issues, TV3 Nightline's narratives are those of 'human interest' (Malay female, UM, 2001). TV2 News is 'more political', TV3 is 'not heavy news' (Malay female, UM, 2001).

An 'appropriate' item would be 'suitable', 'related to us' (Chinese female, UKM, 2000). Television journalists should recognise that 'the audience are not entirely from urban areas' (Indian female, UM, 2001). The Al-Ma'unah movement involved the 'Malays' sentiments', and so was not covered in a TV2 News programme addressed to expatriates and others for whom English was a preferred language, 'not many Malays' (Malay female, UM, 2001).

A Chinese female graduate student at the University of Malaya suggested a news programme's sequence of items prioritised the national, addressing a descending hierarchy of presumed interests amongst viewers. The weather forecast was last. 'We are so thankful to stay in Malaysia, that we don't have so many (climatic) disasters', 'so people are not that concerned about the forecast' (Chinese female, UM, 2001). On the other hand, as a group facilitator pointed out, on TV2 and TV3, 'whatever is related to the PM, it is always the first item' (Chinese female, UKM, 2000).

Television journalism presupposes an audience interest in public events. 'Most of the people who watch TV actually listen to news. They are people who are very concerned (...) (with) what is happening' (Indian male, UKM, 1995). 'Generally, people watch television because they want to see the development in any country' (Chinese/ Malay female, UNIMAS, 2000).

As political citizens, Malaysians are concerned with their nation's status. The country is surrounded by swiftly industrialising societies. 'So their news has been structured, structured (towards covering development issues)' (Indian male, UKM, 1995) (contributor's emphasis).

Human beings imaginatively respond to programmes within the relationships, rhythms and rules of a mundane life-world, their daily lives. They attend to media content relevant to their interests. 'I should say teenagers, they select what kind of programmes, what

kind of items that interest them.' 'If it interests them, they will watch' (Malay female, UKM, 1995) (contributor's emphasis).

'Like my brother, for example, he hates news', 'he will sit down, but reading other story books, but the television's on. But when it come to the sports section, he will sit down there, pay his attention to the news. That's it. After the sports, he will switch off the television and go out' (Chinese female, UKM, 1995).

Viewers watch 'real things' (Indian male, KL, 1995) on television, involving themselves in that which they perceive as relevant to fulfilling their actual or imagined roles (eg., the male adolescent interest in action genres). 'Sports news make me, I like to watch the sport news because (...) real things are happening in sports' (Indian male, school student, KL, 1995).

'Topics such as politics, or shares, I don't think so that would interest (teenagers), but something to do with murder or kidnappings, or something like that', 'dealing with daily issues' (Malay female, UKM, 1995).

News informs and persuades only those who listen, whose pre-existing interests are being addressed. In this respect, the genre's success is essentially hypothetical, dependant on people watching. Hence, much of television emphatically self-advertises as essential viewing.

The medium requisitions a careless audience to (be) consume(d). 'Be watching!' In attracting viewers, a programme strives to present its subject matter as interesting, 'as relevant to its reception, to integrate the audience within the text' (d'Agostino and Tafler, 1995, p. xxvii). When successful, viewers are absorbed.

Where a programme addresses interests disparate from those of its actual viewers, disinterest emerges in those watching. 'I didn't really concentrate (...) on (all) the news', only 'certain news ... controversial issues' (Malay female, UKM, 1995). Pursuing political concerns which are not those of its viewers, television can speak inappropriately, to a non-existent audience.

A Radio Television Malaysia employee studying at UKM in 1995 argued that its conveying government information was the reason 'why RTM is more boring, because (group laughter) the role ... they are playing'. Audience reception characterised by apathy clearly limits possibilities of persuasive identification with media messages. Under such circumstances, convincing viewers is unlikely to be successful.

On the other hand, programmes addressing an audience's self-acknowledged need for information or entertainment generate committed viewers. A content's relevance to role-related interests effects involvement, participation by those watching in narratives which otherwise are experienced as, to use 'that little word', 'boring' (Indian male, UKM, 1995). A news story about a 'satellite joint venture' was clearly perceived by an enthusiastic Radio Television Malaysia employee as appropriate to his concerns, and hence 'very interesting'. 'I love new technologies' (Indian male, UKM, 1995).

Many news items are seen as impinging on their interests by informed individuals in their role of citizens: 'whatever changes in the political scene affects us too, whatever happens

in the economic front happens to us too', 'lay-offs, families, and all that' (Indian male, UKM, 1995). Acknowledging relevance in one university focus group (1995) appeared to depend on whether participants were undergraduates or older students taking a Certificate course.

Some aspects of news could be relevant to studies but not to engaging with life more widely. Undergraduates reluctantly conceded an imposed requirement for 'knowing the information' (eg., in examinations). But it was knowledge which had 'nothing to do with me, so I don't really bother what's happening, actually' (Indian female, UKM, 1995), 'very boring' (Chinese female, UKM, 1995) (contributor's emphasis).

Boredom, or lack of involvement in a programme's concerns, can be gender-related. News and current affairs programmes, it has been argued, form a masculine television genre distinct from the feminine continuous serial (or soap opera), generally of more interest to women. This thesis found support in the announcement by a young Chinese female contributor that, 'news for me is very boring'.

'I've not much idea about the news, because I hate news (group laughter). (It is) very boring, compared to, like movies or some small short dramas. News for me is very boring because I have to sit down and ... be very serious.' 'It's very boring' (laughter) (Chinese female, UKM, 1995).

We have noted that audience disinterest can have a political explanation. Radio Television Malaysia functions in close collaboration with the state. One of its employees, a student at the National University of Malaysia in 1995, argued that RTM's TV2 News was 'a run down of the good old government advice'. Another employee concurred:

'I think that RTM, they cannot compete because they have this guideline. So, this is what they have to show and that's how. But for TV3 (...) more sensational, more visual, and all that'.

An item or 'portion' on the Malaysian car Proton was a 'quite obvious' attempt to 'boost up' 'the image' of a key national industry. In 1995, this was in a 'very difficult situation', an effect of the Japanese earthquake disaster on shipments.

In these readings of TV2 News, its selection and presentation of items (or agenda) was associated with political promotion. The broadcast viewed was 'deconstructed', analysed by a Radio Television Malaysia employee as a 'discourse' on the strong state of the economy, a public relations promotion in preparation for a general election to be held later in 1995. This was 'the role that RTM has to play as the government media'.

'So ... (the) election is coming on and everything, so that they have to portray a good image. Like I think they don't want people to start thinking that things are starting to go wrong and all that, so they have to portray the good image there for the government. (...)

So that's why RTM is more boring (group laughter). Because the role ... they are playing, it's different from TV3 which is actually a commercial TV (station). So they are going more, you know, on the sensational issues, and all that'

The audience detachment signalled by boredom marks a failure to identify, to be persuasively 'positioned' (or convinced). The negative response in the focus group where Radio Television Malaysia's employees were participants suggested relying on the news media to 'portray a good image' could be a self-defeating strategy. TV2's prioritising support for the government's political future effectively privileged 'boring' issues. Information about entertainment may be provided to 'spice up the dull news' (Chinese/ Malay female, UNIMAS, 2000).

News as 'good old government advice' can mean the everyday interests of the audience become marginalised as a basis for selecting programme content. This is not to suggest viewers detected deceit on TV2 News ['the thing that (is) shown in news is a fact' (Chinese male, UKM, 1995)]. Rather it is to indicate their experience of an inappropriate (and hence uninteresting) news agenda. TV2 News is 'so dull' (Chinese male, UNIMAS, 2000), 'the background', 'the presenters' (Malay female, UNIMAS, 2000).

'TV2 News is boring', the 'whole thing, the background, the set, the person' (Chinese/ Malay male, UNIMAS, 2000). Those watching must be, 'people who don't know the existence of TV3 and NTV7', 'people who are not exposed to other forms of media about the same news' (Chinese/ Indian/ Malay female, UNIMAS, 2000).

'Basically, TV2 I'd say is the last switched on' (Chinese/ Malay female, UNIMAS, 2000). 'Sometimes we even switch off the TV if we cannot get non-RTM stations' (Chinese/ Malay female, UNIMAS, 2000). By 2001, contributors at both UKM and UNIMAS were able to indicate that the Internet had arrived as an alternative source of news for young people. 'If we can't get news from TV, then we can go for Internet! 'Yeh!' (female students, UNIMAS, 2000)

Nevertheless, television should be an important contributor to the formation of political consciousness, even if audiences do not always respond with enthusiasm. In the TV2 News 1995 programme screened in this research, the first item concerned updating electoral voter lists. Viewers were addressed here in their role as political citizens, with an appropriate interest in relevant information.

The election is 'important to all the nation' (Chinese male, KL, 1995). But as governments acknowledge, real voters can lose sight of their interests. People 'don't go and vote, I mean, for several times', 'so they cancel their rights' (Chinese male, KL, 1995).

During a subsequent focus group in 1995, an Indian female undergraduate at the National University of Malaysia noted the dilemma between cultivating a politically aware citizenry and boring them when disinterested. This quandary arose, for instance, over the issue of Malaysia deciding whether to give missiles to the Bosnian Muslims.

In supporting this minority group, the possible effects of an adverse response by the major powers on Malaysia's economic development had to be considered, 'what the big countries will do on us'. All 'the Malaysians should know what is the (stand?) of Malaysia' (Indian female, UKM, 1995). But in 'foreign news', claimed a less interested security guard, 'the images portrayed are not relevant to Malaysians' (Malay male, KL, 1995).

When it comes to events outside Malaysia, argued an Indian male employee of Radio Television Malaysia studying at the National University in 1995, news needs to be 'tailored' to meet the concerns of its citizens, as in coverage of the Bosnian conflict. National preoccupations are addressed and consequently reinforced.

Television has to be 'a little bit pro-government and pro-the-Malaysian-society. I mean (...) they do coverages, they took items, news from the international, is meant for the Malaysian audience. (...)

'Because our Malaysian government policy was, "we support the oppressed", and this happened to be the Bosnians there, so the news is covered in that way, structured, (...) tailored for the Malaysian society, the Malaysian viewers.' (contributor's emphasis)

Where those watching do not possess the civic interests of the viewers presumed by television's agenda, they are unlikely to become concerned with its issues. An audience preoccupied by its own distinctive form of life and 'rationality' does not become involved in programmes experienced as culturally distant, however emphatically stated much of their content may be.

'I mean like Aids groups, they're not easily influenced by what they watch, you know. They can, they have their own rationality to think, you see' (Indian female, UKM, 1995).

Mismatching the presumed and actual interests of viewers produces an apathetic audience. Apparently less concerned with forming political awareness, News on the 'commercial station' (TV3) emphasised instead ('going in' with) 'current issues', 'hot stories now'. Its preoccupation, not evident on TV2, was with the 'sensational', 'highlighting' 'murder cases'.

A Chinese female Radio Television Malaysia employee working in radio and studying at the National University in 1995 believed TV3 provided issues of citizenship with secondary and subordinate treatment after 'human interest' stories (repeating a pattern in the West). Commercial television likes 'to highlight something of human interest, rather than national issues (...) followed later, followed by national issues'.

Boredom undermines any interest in, and identification with, a newscaster's 'knowledgeable' perspective on the world. A talking head with little to show risks tedium: 'sometimes we tend to feel bored because, like TV2, they just focus on the newscasters, and so it's like boring to just see them all the time during the news' (Chinese female, UKM, 1995) (contributor's emphasis).

The 1995 focus group participants' assessment of mise-en-scene (studio setting) and mode of news presentation compared Radio Television Malaysia's TV2 News unfavourably with the commercial station TV3's Evening News (criticism conforming to more widespread Malaysian negative comment on the public sector). As one of the certificate students at the National University of Malaysia concluded, TV2 News was 'monotonous', a presentation without 'colour'.

Aesthetic evaluations favoured the commercial channel's presentation of its journalism. The judgement that it has a 'lot more interesting visuals than TV2' (Malay female, UKM, 1995) was echoed by a Chinese student asserting that TV2 News was 'not so lively and

not so interesting' (Chinese male, UKM, 1995) as TV3 Evening News. TV3 showed a wider coverage of 'overseas' events than TV2 News (Chinese male, UKM, 1995).

Newsreaders on TV3 Evening News were experienced by research participants as 'lively' and 'stylish' (Indian female, UKM, 1995), with even 'non-verbal' aspects of their communication evoking possibilities of identification. This differed from the 'backdated' presenters on TV2 News, where 'you just get bored after watching for a while' (Indian female, UKM, 1995).

Such comments at the National University of Malaysia were echoed subsequently during conversations with Chinese college and Indian school students in Kuala Lumpur. TV3 Evening News was almost everywhere preferred to TV2's parallel product. In the city focus groups, analyses of screen content were more detailed. Aspects of studio presentation (or mise-en-scene) which enhanced viewer interest and intelligibility of script received favourable attention.

TV3 Evening News' informality (as on CNN news) 'keeps your interest' (Chinese male, college student, KL, 1995), as do on-the-spot reporters, who also carry greater authenticity. Their presence on location suggests, 'they have been reporting the thing correctly' (Chinese male, college student, KL, 1995).

These Chinese college students met with myself. The all-male group of Indian contributors (a film editor and school students) in Kuala Lumpur discussed the news presentations with two Malay women researchers. But change of moderator did not alter audience preference for TV3 Evening News. It was, claimed the film editor, more 'advanced', more technically proficient in editing accompanying footage, and 'accurate' (Indian male, KL, 1995) than TV2 News.

The film editor's view that TV3 Evening News was more up-to-the-minute, 'comes earlier' than TV2 News, with 'more news from overseas', was supported by a school student in the Indian group. The latter was enthusiastic. TV3 Evening News contained, 'the latest news, what's happening in Malaysia and outside Malaysia' (Indian male, school student, KL, 1995).

In 2000/ 2001 TV2 News was again the focus of audience criticism. 'TV3 (Nightline) is more colourful and more attractive (than TV2 News) because they want to make a profit, because they're non-government. (...) So they must present well' (Malay female, UM, 2001). TV2 News is 'quite old-fashioned compared to TV3 because the (latter's) news is quite updated (...) more up-to-date' (Malay female, UM, 2001).

But hope was expressed. Another Malay student contributor considered changes had occurred on TV2. Radio Television Malaysia's relatively new World News at midnight marked a turn for the better, with its 'voice clearer, and it attracts attention' (Malay female, UNIMAS, 2000).

'Aesthetic satisfaction' was regarded as an aspect of other channels' news consumption. Presenters were 'good looking people'. (Chinese/ Malay male, UNIMAS, 2000) TV3 News (in Malay) was 'more colourful' ('better graphics'), and the presenters wear 'better make-up' (Chinese/ Malay and Malay females, UNIMAS, 2000). NTV7 News was 'validated' by

on-the-spot reporting. Experience 'plays a role in making them decide what is the things that's going on' (Indian female, UKM, 2000).

HABERMAS' 'IDEAL SPEECH'

Being informed on the news that Malaysia has 'less dust' than other countries is 'ridiculous': 'I think every country is the same' (Chinese female, UKM, 2000).

Ideally, television's information-bearing news programmes contribute to reasoned discussion amongst a nation's population in a public sphere 'constituted by the political institutions and the media of communication' (Jensen, 1986, p.32). Media offer the means for debate. 'I like 'Dr. Mahathir because of his capability to sustain Malaysian economic growth to be one of the best in the world.' (Malay female, school teacher, Kuala Lumpur, 1995)

For the influential German social theorist Jurgen Habermas, such discursive 'ideal speech' or reasoned discussion has consequences, people's securing an agreed or consensual truth. On the other hand, sometimes threatening to derail the rational conduct of the debate, political institutions can seek to limit the insight of those who contribute.

Here I set out further Habermas' views on the nature of rational discussion. Drawing on Malaysian contributions to focus groups (which themselves can be evaluated as ideal speech), I consider news programmes from an audience perspective, as discourse seeking to persuade, not always equitably.

Alongside print and on-line journalism, television news offers within the public sphere(s) of national debate a (more or less varied) play of perspectives on events. In this way, programmed journalism is a 'political resource' informing governed and governing (Jensen, 1986, p.67). Habermas considered the public sphere to be constituted by processes of (institutionally located) discussion distinct from the operations of the state.

Jensen's research in the United States suggested that for American news audiences 'the information has few broadly social and political applications, at least in the short term'. Reception prompts rather, 'negotiation about social and political issues' instead of audience action (Jensen, 1986, pp.206, 267).

More widely, for Habermas, the ultimate goal of such discussion, implicit if not always explicitly stated, must be truth, defined as an 'uncoerced consensus' (Larrain, 1994, p.122). Attaining this end is achieved by reasoned argument under conditions of speech where neither ideology nor other forms of (eg., psychological) oppression are operating.

Conclusions from such ideal speech should be open to agreement by everyone 'whether in this culture or any other' (Hoy, 1996, p.85). In reaching decisions, only actions furthering the interests of all rather than any preferred sub-group can be contemplated. Ideal speech may be considered a particularly significant model for journalism in developing societies.

Considered against the high standard of ideal speech, news, current affairs programmes and television more generally can be judged as to whether their persuasion of audiences

is arrived at through rational discussion. Or is, alternatively, both non-rational and contrary to viewers' interests (Corner, 1995, p.156).

Critical theorists following Habermas hold that, if genuinely committed to reasoned debate, contributors to studio discussions (such as news interviews and talk shows) must meet certain standards. At least implicitly, they should acknowledge a 'discourse ethics'. A minimal distribution of opportunities for participants to contribute is, after all, the condition of a televised talk show continuing on screen.

Particularly in the context of presenters' familiar everyday address to viewers of news and popular television (such as game shows), a certain egalitarianism must be maintained: 'on the box, everyone is the same' (focus group contributor, Livingstone and Lunt, 1994, p.101). Amongst participants, extra time needs explanation.

Sometimes this desire for equality is manifested in a contempt for experts or technical knowledge, the other-than-commonsense. Ideally, television's contributors are each enabled to present a coherent statement, with every person counting, so to speak, for one and none for more than one. A news interviewer should maintain equality of presentation time amongst participants.

Committed contributors to a studio discussion are required to avoid, in particular, responses which might be construed as exercising psychological force, as diminishing the right of those present in the community of debate to participate. Interruption, for instance, postpones others' contributions.

On Radio Television Malaysia's former talk show *Global* (TV2, Sunday nights), for instance, the convention of waiting one's turn to intervene, an opportunity to speak 'awarded' by the host, was on one occasion consciously infringed during an expert panel's discussion of information technology. 'If I could jump in real quickly ...', asserted the General Manager for Microsoft Malaysia.

Participants' use of sexist language is a notable instance of politically 'distorted communication', of a failure to meet the egalitarian imperative implicit in Habermas' concept of ideal speech. A *Global* contributor to its investigation of the computer's social effects announced that, 'with this technology, the weaker sex, so to speak, can actually now do ...'. He was promptly reprimanded by the programme's host: 'they don't like that word, "weaker" sex.'

Considered as ideal speech, contributions to debate on news and current affairs shows shift between intermittent adherence to principles and less enlightened actual practice. Unevenhanded negotiation of opinion can characterise both genres. Rationality, responsibilities, rights and roles in these public spheres of talk and thought are defined around discussion.

Ideally, a studio debate on an important issue in the news should constitute a process of reasoned inquiry, with those present reflecting on experience using appropriate intellectual resources. Equal consideration would be given to the interests of its role-occupying participants, with 'protocols of persuasion' informing reasoned responses.

In practice, other considerations, of emotion, power, prejudice, status often disrupt discussion (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994, p.135). Everyday experience, taken-for-granted commonsense, competes alongside expertise. Contributors, indeed, may believe that even a 'cogent' intervention is likely to have limited effect, at best a slight shift in the distribution of resources rather than consensual commitment by others to their cause.

NEWS AS PROGRAMMED PERSUASION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

'You can propagate me all you want, lah!'

(Chinese/ Malay male, University of Malaysia Sarawak, 2000)

Informing and persuading viewers, albeit with imperfect rationality, television enters the public sphere of debated difference. It meets with audience judgement. Western documentaries, 'they're good', those 'about science, about Towards the Year 2000, these shows are quality shows, I mean quality programmes, because they provide knowledge to the public' (Malay female, UKM, 1995). News television is informing narrative and argument, apparently authenticated by the 'credibility of the visuals' (Jensen, 1986, p.63).

Acknowledging its status as persuasive discourse is particularly important in considering Malaysia's English language news, watched by members of the country's influential commercial and other groups. Within television's programmes everywhere are 'privileged' interpretations (or preferred readings) of the events it shows. Amongst its intended audiences, news seeks to legitimate a world view (Jensen, 1986, p.247).

Television's viewers play out pre-existing power relations in the process of actualising the meaning of a text (Jensen, 1986, pp. 71,78,82). Patriarchy, for instance, is affirmed by particular interpretations of social change on screen. While often more open to different readings than film, programmes embody persuasion by political ideology or party, seeking audience agreement.

Sometimes these textual assertions of power or privilege have become 'so centrally constitutive of our world views that we fail to notice what they are' (Press, 1995, p.53). They need to be teased out, carefully exhibited as present on television. News programmes, in both East and West, are in this respect little different.

News television's persuasion, its intervention in the public sphere, is expressed in its conversational mode of address. Presenters appear to speak directly to us. Discussion amongst viewers can be considered an appropriate response to issues raised by global programming. News allows us to 'develop to a certain extent', it is 'one way for us to know how the Westerners are like, how do they live?' (Malay female, UKM, 1995) (contributor's emphasis).

Debate amongst audiences (as on television) recognises differences. Yet it also requires a common frame of reference in regard, for instance, to agreed standards of discussion. In this sense, considering divergence in opinion presupposes shared values and practices, 'the same culture' (Chinese female, UKM, 1995). Likewise, in Habermas' ideal speech associated with the public sphere, seeking a satisfactory conclusion is guided by reason taking into account interests common to all contributors.

Agreement amongst participants (on necessary rules securing the very possibility of exchanging opinion) permits a variety of views to emerge. Generally, 'Asians are more conservative (...) when it comes to moral values' (Malay female, UKM, 1995). A shared recognition of the 'family' as important can co-exist with different opinions on how the relationship between parents and children should be appropriately conducted within the varying domestic life-worlds of Chinese, Indians, Malays and others.

Discussion of (and in) programmes is, then, a response to television's endeavours to position its audience, to persuade them of truths about the world. The focus groups at the heart of this research were instances of talk in the public sphere, if not of ideal speech, in which people debated viewing. They fulfilled a 'forum function' (Pietila, 2001, p.12).

News reception illustrates responses to the persuasive moment of televisual consumption. Acquiescence in a presenter's statements, or programmed point-of-view, can sustain viewers' subsequent contributions to a debate on current issues, producing a public sphere of (more or less) informed citizens.

The world enters our homes through the small screen. 'Time-space bridging' (Tomlinson, 2000, p.403) television appears to bring content closer to consumers. Sharing identification with an intelligible 'anchorpersion' integrates the medium's audiences (Jensen, 1986, p.66). Focus group members were particularly sensitive to the mode of televisual persuasion, to the ease (or difficulty) with which information could be acquired from presenters.

If news is to connect an audience to the world, it must be both accurate and appropriate, enabling a 'fusion of horizons' in which programme perspectives on the non-televisual can be intelligibly engaged with by viewers within their own horizons (frameworks) of understanding events. Points-of-view should be accessible. Malaysia's multiplicity of languages means that news discourse must be correspondingly diverse.

News everywhere, persuades, albeit in different ways. A text's attempt to convince audiences may be regarded as assigned, as ordained by the political institutions of the day as a distinct project for a 'partnership press'. Programming can be 'in consonance with a state agenda' (Jayasankar and Monteiro, 1998, p.62). In the news, 'some parts are controlled by the Government' (Chinese male, UKM, 1995). 'One of the functions of mass media is (...) to teach our attitudes, our behaviour, right?' (Indian male, UKM, 1995)

A female student from Radio Television Malaysia in one of my 1995 focus groups at the National University of Malaysia drew a distinction between deliberately sought and unintended political influence. Programme content is knowledge-conveying, but also evaluates the world.

On the one hand, there are news bulletins, where by emphasising 'all the good, good things', political persuasion is intended, 'they have to portray the good image there for the government'. On the other, there is the apparently apolitical television serial drama associated with both Asian and Western television, which is 'not seeking to influence us, but in a way it does influence'.

This woman's male colleague agreed, with students in other groups articulating an account of news as deliberate 'propaganda'. Linking narrative to intended effect, a news item on Malaysian car production was read as a political prescription to purchase.

'That is, of course, (the RTM news production team) wants to influence the people to be behind our government all the way, so they are portraying all the good, good things.' But there is 'news that might have been played down because it doesn't suit the government's image, or things like that'. 'I think TV3's also trying to influence us.' (female and male students, UKM, 1995)

Certain news items are 'propaganda trying to influence the people, you see. (Our?) government is doing something good. Especially if there's elections on.' (group laughter) The 'government (is) doing a lot of things that benefit the people': 'certain news, they try to get influence of the general public' (female student, UKM, 1995) (murmurs of agreement) (contributor's emphasis).

'The programme is trying to, asking the people to accept the government's policy, maybe, and to accept the Proton Perdana, and to try to promote it so that the people will want to buy the car.' (Malay female, UKM, 1995)

'I think for the Malaysian car, also. They influence us. Because they want us to buy the car from our own country.' (Malay male, television employee, UKM, 1995) (murmurs of agreement) (contributor's emphasis)

But as with a drama, whether or not deliberately intended by a writer, a news bulletin's stories also convey a wider point-of-view on life, a preferred understanding of the world's institutions and events. Soap operas and serious television journalism alike, contain representations of social class, ethnicity, gender and generational difference, unavoidably articulating some accounts and avoiding others. Events are always seen in a particular way.

News characteristically aligns its audience with particular perspectives in its selective menus featuring 'important' items or through 'mechanisms of identification' (Wilson, 1995). Evaluating an issue as significant by positioning it at the outset of a bulletin, or permitting newscasters' direct address to camera in their celebration of 'middle-ground' politics, authoritatively persuades viewers to identify with a programmed point-of-view, an assertion of social analysis.

Whether made in Asia or the West, television always perceives power (and its absence) to take particular forms of social distribution. Media studies claims that programmes function persuasively, position their audiences to adopt or affirm particular political accounts of the world, even where there seems to many an absence of authorial (scriptwriter's) intention in this respect.

News is 'just informing us about what happens around the world', 'that's all, it's not trying to influence peoples' attitudes or behaviour' (Malay female, UKM, 1995). It is, 'where we get information from, and there's no advice, except from our ministers' (Chinese female, UKM, 1995). News is 'mostly for our information, our own information' (Indian male, UKM, 1995). (contributor's emphasis)

'I think (news) is just giving us the facts, the current issues happening around us. So I don't think it does bring any influence to us, just lets us know what happens' (Chinese female, KL, 1995).

News consumption has political consequences for viewers' understanding of society and themselves, whether deliberately designed or not to have this effect on audiences. All information is value-laden. Focus group respondents evidently understood this to be the case, arguing that programmes written as information-bearing nevertheless 'indirectly' influenced viewers more widely. With its content commonly regarded as firmly factual, news is being read here as nevertheless also persuasively evaluative. Television enunciates a textual politics, irrespective of authorial intention.

'You know, we (are) indirectly influenced.'

(Malay female, UKM, 1995).

'Indirectly influenced'.

(Malay male, television employee, UKM, 1995).

'Not directly' (both) (laughter).

'So by telling you it indirectly influences, is that it?' (TW)

'Ah, yes!' (both).

'Just by telling, by the information?' (TW)

'Ah yes, indirectly' (both).

The capacity of television programmes to affect people's view of their political circumstances in both specific and wider ways was variously assessed by focus groups in 1995 and 2000/2001. 'No doubt (news) contains some of the (...) propaganda of the Government, some image-building of our leader. And it, more or less, has some little influence on people's thinking, our Malaysian citizens' thinking' (student, UKM, 1995).

Consistent with such a view of information's impact on image, a Malay female film editor in Kuala Lumpur judged her prime minister favourably: 'Dr. Mahathir is a charismatic leader' (1995). In a different group, an Indian school student concluded, news produces 'cautious' people (Indian male, KL, 1995). On the other hand, a Malay woman school teacher asserted definitively that there was, 'nothing in the news that can influence peoples' attitudes and behaviour' (1995).

'TV2 implements government policy' declared a contributor at University of Malaya (Malay male, UM, 2001). A Malay female contributor made it clear that TV2 continued in 2000 to be regarded as a 'government agency', with its news 'trying to just portray the good side of the government'. Consequently, 'we have to be very critical'.

On the other hand, for this Malay woman viewer, TV3 Nightline was trying to 'balance the needs of the government and the community'. However, 'I will not absorb everything that's being said' by television journalism: rather she compared content with other sources of information. A perception of herself as an active viewer was clearly constructed in her discourse.

'There's always that question mark, how much of it is true, how much is hidden (...) so you have to do a lot of interpreting and sometimes just ignore certain' items. 'That's my

understanding of listening and interpreting the news of the two channels' (Malay female, UM, 2001).

At the National University of Malaysia, an Indian female student argued that news programmes sought to persuade in the public sphere by arranging for 'highly respected' ministers and others to articulate ideas. Viewers were thereby influenced. But with alternative sources of information increasingly available, they equally could critically resist messages on screen.

'TV3 has been using this tactic for quite some time, whereby they use all these ministers and people that are highly respected, so that they get the message across.' 'News in our country, especially, the extent of influence is definitely there. It plays a very major role in Malaysians' actions or beliefs.'

'But I think Malaysians, now, they are more aware, they are a very knowledgeable lot. So they do not solely depend on these news reports.' 'When you report to them, they will, of course, weigh the pros, the cons, do I agree, do I not agree, what do I think?'

The availability of different accounts 'sets your mind thinking, lah, and you are the one who decides'. 'Just because the Prime Minister is saying, or the Minister is saying, they just don't accept it any more' (Indian female, UKM, 2000) (contributor's emphasis).

Elsewhere, at University of Malaya a graduate student considering her experience claimed: 'maybe it takes time for me to analyse the news, but on the spot I will trust the news' (Chinese female, UM, 2001). But another Chinese student (woman) argued for immediate scepticism: 'I just want to (say ?) that we cannot really a hundred per cent rely on (the truth of) the news being published'.

Comparison between information resources is always possible. 'To do news today is not as easy' as previously, 'we are not as passive as last time': 'we have so many sources of information that we can refer to', 'TV is not mainly the only source' (Chinese female, UM, 2001) (contributor's emphasis).

Finally, distinguishing between unintentional and deliberate political persuasion (seeking a 'hegemonic' or power-favouring consensus), another Chinese student claimed television journalism promoted 'ideology or propaganda'. She 'really cannot believe what they produce in the news' which constantly bears the message of the government's evading responsibility, that 'they cannot be criticised' (Chinese female, UM, 2001). Resisting this persuasion, the viewer 'will stand on his ideas' (Chinese female, UM, 2001).

NEWS AS A PLAY OF PERSPECTIVES

'Sometimes it's quite confused, you know, when you watch news. Because sometimes if you watch Channel Two News (TV2), they will say, "like this". And then you turn to the other channel, and they will say, "like this"' (Melanau female, UNIMAS, 2000).

News can offer plural perspectives within the public sphere(s) of national debate on emerging issues, avoiding 'bias' (Malay female, UKM, 2000). Nevertheless, the value of some activities, like co-operation between governments when facing international threats,

should be unquestioned. 'Reporting about how they work together to face these problems is important' (Malay male, UKM, 2000).

TV2 News' perspectives were suggested by a Chinese graduate student in 2001 to be those of 'governmental media', 'governed by the government', 'formal media'. 'This will influence the way the reporter interviews the persons, to interpret the news.' (Chinese female, UM, 2001) But television channels differ.

This University of Malaya postgraduate contributor distinguished between Radio Television Malaysia's point-of-view on TV2 and the perspective from which TV3's Nightline 'interprets the news': the latter's focus on events gives this student 'what she wants', and consequently a 'sense of belonging'. The 'image that they sell is different' on these television channels (Chinese female, UM, 2001).

In one evening, programmes like Malaysia's TV2 and TV3 News can concentrate upon (or foreground) entirely different items of perceived importance. Some viewers find this stimulating, others perplexing. Although 'both in English', there's so much difference in how (TV2 and TV3) present everything: the studio, the background, the news, the local, the foreign news. There's (a) lot of difference, and this shouldn't happen because viewers get, will be confused in what to watch and what not to watch' (Indian female, UKM, 1995).

On the other hand, some participants in our 2000/2001 focus groups suggested that the points-of-view circulating in news programmes were restricted. Even 'the petrol price increase, they just report it without looking at other angles' (Malay male, UKM, 2000). On-line journalism offered alternative 'sides' to a story.

'For me to make an informed decision, definitely I will also (look for?) alternative news': 'on your on-line newspapers', 'this Internet piece of news, perhaps, is actually highlighting a different angle, a different side of the story' (Indian female, UM, 2001).

A Malay (female graduate) student who was also a journalist argued that the perspective she and other professionals adopted in contributing to a news programme was one of simply relaying a speaker's point-of-view: 'we go and we come back and we just report. We are not a so-called "real journalist", that we can simply edit or anything' (Malay female, UM, 2001).

For another Malay contributor, this strategy of 'transparent' reporting would appear to be neglecting a social responsibility. She suggested, 'what the PM says is always right', but where he is negative (eg., about Malay business commitment) the editor should 'try to give a positive side', 'to help our nation' (Malay female, UM, 2001).

News segments can be limited in who they represented: 'they don't focus on people, how they're feeling and all that, they only ask all the top people, ok, what did they think about it?' (Bidayuh female, UNIMAS, 2000) 'The PM is the main source of news in Malaysia' (Malay female, UM, 2001). Controversial opinions can be avoided because, 'Malaysians are not that open-minded, you see' (Malay female, UNIMAS, 2000).

However, a mature Malay student argued that a 'one-sided' TV2 News story about the Kuala Lumpur monorail (built 'really for companies to make a lot of profit') considered it only from a company perspective, neglecting the views of those whose lives were

inconvenienced by its construction. 'I think more needs to be said about this whole thing, rather than, you know, "news-in-brief".' (contributor's emphasis)

'I know the inconvenience it has caused (...) but there's nothing much said about trying to reduce the inconvenience caused to the public while the constructions are being done. And is there really going to be less traffic or less congestion if the monorail is really operating fully? I think the reality is that this is not so. So I think you get a one-sided picture of the whole thing.' (Malay female, UM, 2001)

Two contributors at the National University of Malaysia agreed that they discerned a difference in emphasis between channels in the degree to which they covered those 'close with the government' (Indian male, UKM, 2000). The newer channel NTV7 offered a more 'everyday' perspective on the world.

'TV3 tends to be more formal, they give you what's going on, the minister's doing, and all that, whereas NTV7, maybe because of their time limit, but basically it's just touching on everyday things' (Indian female, UKM, 2000). 'NTV7 is closer to us than TV3. TV3 is very formal, they're very close with the government', sensitive to 'protocol' (Indian male, UKM, 2000).

Access to non-Malaysian media also offered difference. News television in Thailand (in part sourced from CNN?) provided more focussed treatment of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's trial than accounts available in Malaysian programmes. 'We can get a clear picture of what happened in KL by referring to Thailand news rather than referring to TV3 or TV2 news.' (Malay female, UM, 2001).

The Al-Ma'unah movement 'rebelled' against the government, 'it involved the security of the state'. Consequently, a Malay student suggested, some information emerging from the trial of its members discussed in TV3's Nightline was not mentioned on 'the government TV', in a TV2 News programme (Malay female, UM, 2001).

'In some cases, they don't give the whole information', 'things that you want to know'. 'You want to know the whole story.' 'They seem to give only some information, probably for the safety of the country', 'they don't want any copycats'. News is 'filtered' (Chinese/Malay male, UNIMAS, 2000) (contributor's emphasis).

Television's current affairs agenda could be pre-occupied with limited issues. 'They don't really show the real life scenarios, they just take a bit of it' (Bidayuh female, UNIMAS, 2000). 'We haven't had that much excitement. That's why they seem to be really overdoing it with that Al-Ma'unah thing', 'it seems to be all over the place' (Chinese/ Indian/ Malay female, UNIMAS, 2000).

In this context, an Indian female student at the National University of Malaysia suggested a novel reading of 'narrowcasting'. Rather than the term's referring to a programme's addressing a restricted audience interest group, for her, it denoted the limited perspectives of those who produce television's 'knowledge', their drawing upon a confined range of sources. Little reference in the news to overseas perceptions of Malaysia was 'narrowing the viewers'.

'What we hear is what is our country's view. What the country thinks should be, what the country thinks is the best for this nation. That's all they're showing. So it doesn't broaden our views, it's only narrowing the viewers. So I find that for the TV programmes, it should be, more open-minded.' (Indian female, UKM, 1995).

She appealed for a breadth of vision, a 'world news' from many perspectives: 'the programmes we watch is mainly from only (a) few countries (...) Even the news, also, we listen (to) is one-sided news, if I can say (CNN)' (Indian female, UKM, 1995). More recently, NTV7 appears to have attempted to redress this limited and limiting narrowcast vision, perhaps to the point of excess, 'covering so much on foreign news, local, they didn't touch much' (Indian female, UKM, 2000) (contributor's emphasis).

There is no 'national coverage on sports', yet 'we're supposed to stress more on local developments'; 'when it comes to sports, we just neglect'. Coverage of overseas sports suggests 'you'd rather see Africans running around than Malaysians' (Chinese/ Malay female, UNIMAS, 2000).

CONCLUSION

'I have no conclusion ... because (the focus group contributors) have said all that has to be said'
(Malay male, UKM, 2000).

Regarded by some as setting standards for democratic dialogue, Habermas' conception of an integrated public sphere instantiating ideal speech has been repeatedly criticised elsewhere. Its discursive goal of achieving universal consensus fails, so it is argued, to accommodate 'diversity in the public domain', a 'hetero-genous public' with differing interests (McLaughlin, 1993, p.604). Malaysia's multi-cultural society, with its many religious groups, can hardly be expected to yield a single standard in deciding social practice.

While there can be wide agreement upon rules for the conduct of debate, culturally distinct perceptions of desirable ends to be achieved must limit consensus on action. Poole proposes that there are many public spheres, each corresponding to the 'self-awareness of particular social movements' (1989, p.18). Malaysia might be considered a society of many publics.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Professor Mohd. Safar Hasim for this phrase. Without a generous invitation (and *nasi lemak!*) to take part in Malaysian audience research from Professor Mohd. Samsudin Rahim, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the National University of Malaysia, this investigation of television news consumption would not have commenced in 1995. Viewer focus groups were held in that year both at the university and in Kuala Lumpur.

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2. *Pisang goreng*, the Malaysian delicacy of fried banana.

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