The Television Viewer and the Television News: A Combative Encounter

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ABSTRACT

Television news has been studied from a number of perspectives. Few studies have focused on the moment of the encounter between the television viewer and the news. This research focused on what takes place at the encounter as described by the viewer. Its specific research questions were: what viewer typology constructs? What key news aesthetic emerges? And what is the nature of the encounter process? These were examined in a qualitative study mainly using a phenomenological approach involving 58 participants. The study had three key findings: that the television viewer is a disturbed, reflective, and dominating person at the encounter; that an epic news genre dominates the site and process; and lastly, that the key process at the encounter is one of intertextuality through a combative, combustive fusion and filter procedure. The research argues for a new area of encounter studies.

KEYWORDS

Filter and Fusion Intertext, Hermeneutics, Ideologies of Change, Meta Symbol, Viewer Typology

1. INTRODUCTION

The television has been researched for a period of over seventy-five years. It is still a novel medium of mass communication that reaches the resting places of families and individual viewers and is also flashed to television sets in public places across each country. It is still a technological marvel so many years after its invention. In Kenya, news is one of its most widely viewed programmes. This is a study of the moment of encounter between the television viewer and the television news. Little is known about this moment in the Kenyan context and the study argues that a comprehensive detailing of the communication which takes place between the viewer and the news provides fresh and plasma material for interpretation that enables a new way of looking at television news. The research developed three questions as follows – what kind of viewer typology constructs at this encounter? What key television news aesthetic emerges at the encounter? What encounter process manifests? The research expected that the three were interrelated, each focusing on a key player at the communication encounter. At the end the study constructed six research claims as follows: The television viewer is a disturbed, reflective, coveting, highly self-esteem, change-being viewer at the encounter between him or her and the incoming television news; the meta symbol consisting of self-identity, change along the western version of modernity, and the epic story of the country’s national change, is a key influence at the selection, interpretation, and experiencing of television news in viewer at the encounter; the encounter process is dominated by a process of intertextuality that takes place through filtering and fusion; an aesthetic of an epic/montage news genre constructs at the encounter; change and definitions are viable news values; and negative and emotionally disturbing emotions construct in viewer as he or she experiences the incoming television news.
2. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research was investigating three research questions aimed at understanding the moment of encounter between the television viewer and the incoming news. The questions specifically focused on the kind of viewer who constructed at the encounter, the encounter process, and the key news aesthetic which dominantly emerged at the encounter. The three aspects would be interrelated and be the very ones that construct the uniqueness of the encounter.

The research sought to understand the encounter as a communication space and therefore the focus on the nature of those at the two ends of the communication act and whom they became as well as what the encounter became because of what they became were at the heart of the investigation.

The research first conceptualized the viewer followed by the text of incoming news and lastly the construction of meaning by viewer. The conceptualization of the television news viewer focused on four viewer aspects as follows: would the viewer be active or passive? Would he or she have preoccupations which were present at the encounter? Would the viewer have a pre-viewing motive to want to covet the news? Could it be that there is an already existing orientation in viewer on issues evoked by each news account? The research hoped that these four dimensions would help create understanding on the kind of viewer who came to the encounter and then one who constructed at the communication space.

The study thought of the concept of viewer activeness in three ways. The first was in terms of the degree of engaging the incoming news to construct meaning. This in turn would be at the intellectual level and the emotional level. Allen (1987) argues that there are three types of relationships between the reader and text consisting of a collaboration, a surrender, and resistance (Allen, 1987, p 77). The study argued that the television viewer reads into the incoming news and constructs meaning out of each account. What is the viewer like in relation to the three types of engagement identified above? Meanwhile, a second aspect of viewer activeness is argued by Baran and Davis (2006) who point out that an active audience exists and selects what to interact with from initial senders of information (Baran and Davis, 2006, p 269). The third aspect of viewer activeness is in the intensity of viewing along the light and heavy viewers in cultivation theory (Baran & Davis, 2006, p 334).

Meanwhile, the second question on the viewer portrait is on possible viewer preoccupations. Behr and Lyenger (2005) reflected on media and audience needs and stated that “although the public often responded to media agendas, the media rarely responded to the public’s stated political concerns or priorities (Stuart, 2005, p 101). Are there viewer concerns, priorities, preoccupations which are ignored or satisfied through the text of the incoming news?

The current research conceptualized three kinds of preoccupations arguing that these could be important in viewer and would consist of the preoccupation of income, on change in the national situation, and the preoccupation on self-identity (who I am?). The research argued that the three would be inter-linked. Mayers (2005) writes of Jean Sartre, the French philosopher and his statement that “our situations form us and decide our possibilities (Mayers, 2005, p 4). The research anticipated that there would be a desire in viewer to monitor and wish changes at the situation which would in turn affect the income situation, the national situation, and the self-identity situation. Fiedler (1972) conceptualized a national self-identity in this manner, “But to be an American (unlike being a British or French) is precisely to imagine a destiny rather than to inherit it.” (Waugh, 1992, p 39). The news accounts that come to the viewer have an inner voice which define the national situation. In turn, this communicates a definition of viewer national identity. What is it like to be a Kenya? Is it to be part of a people who are constantly failing? Is it a people with a past that one would rather forget? Is it to be part of a people living in a trajectory of change?

From another perspective, Nuneier and Appelbaum (2006) write of self-identity in terms of self-concept and self-esteem as well as self-identity in terms of social roles, social values, and social relations. The individual self-identity and the social self-identity dimensions could be viewer priority concerns at the encounter. The research argued that an income preoccupation would be related to social roles, social relations, and to self-concept as well as self-esteem. On the other hand, positive change at the national situation would have a bearing on individual fortunes including on income.
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