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Who Uses the Internet, and Why?
A Proposed Research Methodology

'Narrowcasting and Net Narrativity: Talkshows as Paradigmatic'*

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Narrowcasting and Net Narrativity: 
Talkshows as Paradigmatic

'When presenting (the Acorn NetStation) to the consumer market we try to fix our literature so that we don't even use the word "computer".' (Managing Director, Acorn Computers, Melbourne Age, 13.8.96)

Generally, people's experiences of interacting with an electronic medium begin with television. Only subsequently (if at all) do they 'surf' on the internet, suspending disbelief. Involvement in programme narratives gives way to new accommodation in virtual reality, to 'interactive tools permitting the subject to steer through complex, challenging situations and environments' (Tafler 1995, 251).

Parallel to this biographical sequence of participating in digital communication, from accounts of television programmes and responses by viewers (as in Audiences Across Cultures) can be derived a method and model for investigating audience use of the world-wide-web. This is to engage with the philosophy, principles and practice of homepage and hypertext construction, where reception by intended users is invariably a central consideration.

The language of television is demonstrably appropriate to the internet, and when inappropriate, suggestive of new analytical schema. 'The Castanet' on-line information delivery platform 'invokes the broadcasting metaphor - transmitters, tuners and channels' [Seybold Report on Internet Publishing, 1(3)]. What is important in developing conceptual tools adequate to accounting for internet use is a reflexive sensitivity to the metaphors or models implicit in understanding electronic communication (eg. 'reading pages', 'narration', 'navigation', and 'point-of-view').

To advocate theoretical convergence in studying electronic media is not to deny that the account which ensues will also require to accommodate significant differences in audience reception of television and the internet (one can, for instance, be said to 'read' both, but only the latter has 'bookmarks'). Viewers switching from talkshow to world-wide-web will inevitably experience visual riches (with a fast modem) after the pared-down naturalistic images of television.

As I've argued in Audiences Across Cultures, consequent upon the economic constraints which followed deregulation, the talkshow is an increasingly frequent form of programming (a rough check some months ago indicated the genre occupied about half of US channels on daytime 'free' television). The talkshow is paradigmatic within the medium's new financial priorities, displacing the continuous serial ('soap opera') as too expensive to produce.

The genre can be understood as a major aesthetic form within television, by reference to which much else about the medium's content may be interpreted. I've suggested that the talkshow addresses particular groups with menus of items intended to attract, while also continually returning to, invoking a consensus. Likewise television itself is diversifying, reconstituted as narrowcasting to specific audience interests (eg. sports channels, news channels) while also contextualising its address by appeals to a wider community (conceived of at least as potential subscribers, economic citizens-with-choice). 'Be the first in your street ...'

Television talkshows are, above all, interactive, with audiences both in the studio and at home responding to host and contributors. The latter's largely autobiographical stories, frequently uncertain in
content, requiring completion by those who listen, nevertheless promote ways of acting in, and understanding the world outside television - advice to which viewers enthusiastically, or critically, respond. Audiences Across Cultures has examined Malaysian reception of these widely circulating narratives constructing knowledge.

The talkshow's narratival content and interactive reception offer a useful model not only in understanding television but in considering audience use of 'web pages' on the internet - audio-visual narrowcasts seeking attention from those who travel on the information superhighway. As in 'VRC-like TV-top Internet machines' (Greenhill and Fletcher 1996, 24), the technologies of electronic communication are converging. So, likewise, must the apparatus of concepts by which they can be understood. Using the software package PointCast, it's 'the deep detail of the Internet served up instantaneously to TV's couch-potato generation' (The Australian, 3.11.97). I propose a televisual model of technology-user interaction in analysing people's reception of the world-wide-web. As Audiences Across Cultures has demonstrated, narratives of response to electronic media can flourish in focus group discussion.

In sustaining this proposition that television and internet theories are following communication technology in converging, the argument outlined in Audiences Across Cultures is commended for consideration. Amongst intended viewers, 'home pages' ought to elicit a recognition of familiar discourse, an accommodating sense of a partly known place and people: personal pages often represent the family of those who seek to introduce themselves. As in studying television audience reception, particular attention should be paid in this proposed research to viewers' interactive identification with, and criticism distanciating itself from the narrative content of the internet.

The suggested inquiry, that is, seeks to transfer a theoretically grounded methodology for empirically investigating television and its audiences to the scrutiny of people's experience of narrowcasting on the internet. Arguably, audience involvement is greater in virtual reality, where a narrated event is not merely seen, but happens to the user (McFadyen 1996). Reflexively aware of employing metaphors in this conceptual inquiry, one must be sensitive to the ways in which the familiar address, interactive play and menus associated with the world-wide-web are distinct from these features of the everyday life-world. Derived from the present study of the talkshow, and directing the inquiry, would be a conception of both programme and home page as:

(i) structured in their presentation by a menu of what's on offer (associated with a host's anticipating what is to come, or a series of hypertext 'buttons')

(ii) seeking to attract their respective audiences through foregrounding familiar content with which intended users find it possible to identify (a content which also serves to mediate the different)

(iii) encouraging a play-like (or ludic) response from viewers to a textual display of narrative, their movement, perhaps, between participatory identification and criticism.

While the use of such abstractions ('menu', 'familiar', 'play-like') in analysing focus group responses to the internet may seem formalistic, their employment can draw attention to cultural and social discourses in cross-cultural (eg. Malaysian) reception of internet-media. An account should emerge of how viewers, grown accustomed to television, relate to the world-wide-web. Philosophical and practical conclusions can be drawn in regard to presenting knowledge on the internet, illuminating the important commercial relationship between intended/ actual audience responses to pages on the web.
'Remember that (in constructing Web sites) all decisions should be made by asking: What will the reader do now? What will they want to know? What will keep them interested?'
(Whitbread, D. 1996, 55)

(a) Global Narrowcasting and Net Narrativity

For most people, as I've indicated, experience of electronic consumption is first of television rather than the computer. Additionally, consumer use of the emerging range of narrowcasting services may well accompany (rather than displace) their watching television, as they electronically shift sideways from the popular viewing of talkshows or news to hypertext pages on 'net stations' or a 'web television'. The latter are technologies intended to familiarise hyper-space, domesticating it (unlike the more distancing computer). It is opposite, therefore, that the mediated interactions of talkshows be the reference point in devising a theoretical model anticipating and analysing early everyday experience of the internet.

In regarding viewer responses to the conduct of talkshows as characteristic of 'contemporary "electronic communities"', the author's belief is that their study will illuminate popular travel on the world-wide-web. Reflecting on narrowcasting, the project seeks to understand the 'processes of creation of new "image spaces" and "cultural identities"' (Morley 1992, 79).

Talkshows seek involvement by curious viewers, and in doing so anticipate the novel alliances pursued by emerging forms of narrowcasting. From a theoretical perspective, I am suggesting, intrigued domestic audiences can be heuristically regarded as resembling future 'lookers-in' (John Logie Baird) who will be prompted to interactive engagement by personal home-pages on the 'net'. Talkshows bear a metonymic relationship to narrowcasting. In studying this prolific genre and its consumption by viewers, conceptual insights emerge into the textual structure and address to users employed by the new technologies of virtual communication - producing a global aesthetic of interactive electronic media.

'Interactivity is part of the general aesthetic of computer use, an aesthetic that has moved from the video game industry, passed through the television industry and now is the mine d'or of the internet.' (Marshall 1997, 58)

Talkshows, like narrowcasting on the internet, are interactivity 'open' to participative involvement, containing possibilities of 'democratising' interventions by an audience. Programmes are always available for fresh insights by new viewers. The texts of narrowcasting are like language itself, 'characterized by openness or "play" such that meanings are never complete but open to interpretation and reinterpretation' (Livingstone and Lunt 1994, 138).

Foregrounding human interaction, talkshows, that is, are democratically suggestive. As Habermas put it, a 'portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body' (Habermas 1984, 49). Yet whether this signifies the emergence of an electronic, egalitarian public sphere of debate must be open to doubt. A similar scepticism has appeared in regard to the likely democratic implications of the
internet, its articulation of a public sphere of genuine discussions. This medium, also, is politically ambivalent (Rodan, 1996).

In words which could carry an international inflection, Badarudin writes of 'changes in the financial bases of the Malaysian broadcasting industry' spawning an 'illusion of democratisation of the media, or "mediacracy", via "interactive" radio and television programmes that thrive on audience "active" participation' (Badarudin 1996). This is a significant pessimism, for there is the basis here for a 'post-soap' political economy of narrowcasting.

The television talkshow and its relationship to an audience can be read as a prefigurative, if microcosmic, model of user-participants' interactive commuting on the world-wide-web, as suggestive of 'highway metaphors' (Marshall 1997, 56). In this respect, the talkshow anticipates future community use of the internet, which 'can bring specialists and experts to more people, through the use of technology, whether it's telemedicine, or some may say, satellite medicine' (Chairman of Pikom Malaysia, on Radio Television Malaysia's Global). Audience reactions to programmed invitations to interactively participate in narrowcasting can range from the enthusiastic to their dismissal as a trivialising of 'substantial areas of social and cultural activity' (Murdock 1992, 34).

In defending my perception of merging methodologies in the study of television and the internet, I conclude by turning to three features of narrowcasting shared by both programme segments in the talkshow genre and internet home pages. Here, narrowcasting sets out to effect a particular kind of reception amongst its intended audiences. Awareness of these defining moments of narrowcasting is important in understanding both audience use of television and consumer involvement in the new electronic media of communication.

(b) Narrowcasting's Familiar Address - a Menu for the Playful Consumer

'Where Do You Want to Go Today?' (Microsoft)

(i) Cultivating an Electronic Familiarity

Characteristically televisual, talkshows addresses its 'game players' (Marshall 1997, 58) with a rhetoric of recognition. On the 'tamed screens' of television or computer, hosts and home-pages prompt player-participants towards mediated involvements with friendly sympathisers or unthreatening sites. No problem, mate! The popular talkshow's welcoming address to a variety of viewers-can be read as analogous to the successful appeal of a much visited internet home-page amongst its diverse users.

The cultivation of an electronic 'familiarity' is embodied in the regular appearance of the dependable talkshow host. Mahadzir Lokman (or indeed Oprah Winfrey) greets each audience, announcing the return and return of their programme. 'To the first-timers, thank you, and don't forget to come back.' (Lokman) Often this recognition is familial in character, generated by avuncular personalities, or by those who prompt audience memories of a kindly 'aunty', defusing the inhumanity of the television apparatus.

Television's electronic simulacra of kindness provide support. Whilst signalling conformity, familiar, friendly faces in well-known places are reassuring in a difficult world. Here, as frequently elsewhere on television, the well known mediates the 'other'. Addressing an audience member (about to ask a question), Lokman welcomed him to the
studio: 'I have to highlight this gentleman here. He came on behalf of (a colleague) who had a sore throat earlier, who could hardly speak.'

Assiduous expressions of 'familiarity' are important in 'new communications'. Narrowcasting emphasises (for economic reasons, if for no other) 'channel loyalty', seeking to secure viewers' regular return to the same channel with which they become increasingly well acquainted. Likewise, the internet's domesticated dependance on 'home pages' offers consumers a safe and simple platform from which to explore a complex virtual reality.

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

In this context, Global must be recognised as cautious experiment. Even as such, its horizons of understanding the changing world of communication technology were not transparently unproblematic for those involved (or indeed, as indicated earlier, for those who watched elsewhere). Audiences at home were asked (using an on-screen display) whether Malaysia could become a net exporter of information technology products. A panel member challenged the accuracy of the question, interrupting as the programme closed, his voice heard above the studio audience applause. This contribution was immediately 'recouped' in the host's hastily organised display of appreciation.

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

Politically, a host's repetitive and emphatic insertion of his or her familiar address within a show's exchanges can establish intimacy, gaining commitment from contributors and viewers while simultaneously effacing inequality. 'Winfrey relies ( ...) on empathetic identification', 'disguising the actual inequity of an encounter where neither power nor disclosure are evenly distributed' (Peck 1995, 65). Similar inequalities are clearly present across the world-wide-web, hard to detect behind the virtual personalities adopted by users.

(ii) Narrowcasting's Menu: Items of Interest

'Modes of seduction to use are as varied as publics to reach' (Mignot-Lefebvre 6, 1996).

Referring not to the internet but to the talkshow they had just watched, a focus group facilitator at Limkokwing Institute of Creative Technology, Kuala Lumpur (where some of the interviewing was conducted) asked her students: 'well, does it come on-line with you, especially the second extract?' (Mun Yee) Her choice of words was apposite. Clearly associated with the linguistic environment of one species of narrowcasting (the internet), they were borrowed for use in a question about another, the English language talkshow in Malaysia.

Hosts on talkshows and home-pages offer menus of information for a viewer to consider, thereby addressing 'clusters of interests' (Marshall 1997, 1). The 'interface has to help the user to feel motivated'
(Mignot-Lefebvre 1996, 6). An early declaration by a talkshow host that an episode of his or her show will negotiate its helpful way through a variety of different (difficult) topics is likely to retain audiences motivated by a range of interests. Such menu-like assistance bears heuristic comparison with the navigatory aid available from home-pages (associated, for instance, with museums and art galleries). Like the opening segment of a talkshow, a web-site's user-friendly iconic prompts offer player-participants a varied set of different interest 'screens'. Curious users navigate their way around through 'linear', 'branching' or 'organic' structures (Taylor 1995, 35).

Talkshows, constructed around a list-like logic, share a 'discursive core' with emerging forms of narrowcasting, an analogous appeal to user-participants. In both, audience address is 'menu-driven', relatively specific while accumulating groups of enthusiasts. Viewers 'navigate' their way between a host's (webmaster's) initial announcement of items and subsequent segments of information (hypertext) directed at the particular interests of participants.

Like well-designed home-pages on the internet, television's participatory programmes allow viewers to 'commute' (Schroder 1988). A talkshow audience's attention can be sporadic, half-attending, awaiting the appearance of an issue anticipated by the host early in the show.

Narrowcasting's 'multiple-audience address', whether uttered by host or displayed on home page, presents viewers with (at least the appearance of) choice. The audience is offered a variety of talkshow segments or internet pages, each dealing with different topics ('couple communication', news items, and so on).

On the one hand, providing individualised information to people with interests, talkshow programmes and internet pages assemble an audience by bringing together a variety of viewers regarded as possessing distinct concerns, rather than by addressing an undifferentiated mass. On the other, establishing the limiting horizons of what is available, narrowcasting's characteristically individuating menus flexibly engage with an implied consensual 'us' - 'we' who, negotiating programme meaning or navigating through the world-wide-web, are able to choose. With its menu of possibilities offered to the wider world, the talkshow's/ internet's sought-for relevance is to the interests of those who pursue particular life-styles, citizens-at-large.

(iii) The Playful Consciousness of Identification

Narrowcasting (such as cable television) seeks participation from viewers conceived of simply as citizens, or more narrowly, as members of an interest group. It plays from the universal to the particular; Likewise, world-wide-web home pages electronically address the global reader with more or less specific detail, acknowledging those who 'click on' menus or 'buttons'. Both the talkshow and the internet are expressly interactive, encouraging an audience involvement in the production of meaning that earlier television could conceal (allowing misguided claims that television viewers are passive).

Focus group discussions in Audiences Across Cultures have displayed the viewer's 'playful consciousness' in his or her responses to an equally ludic text. Audiences engage and disengage with programmes, a process involving all who watch television. Such heightened interactivity informs the spectatorial consciousness of those who commute between identifying and realising a critical distance from the text.
A woman student at UKM playfully identified with universal moral values she established in *Good Advice*, but distanced herself from details (Chapter Two). 'There are times when you just forfeit everything and be there for a fellow friend. Maybe not sleep on the couch, but (laughter) other ways.' (UKM2) Likewise, in Chapter Three, a female undergraduate at USM acknowledged the possibility of audience involvement in universal talkshow topics. But equally she asserted a capacity to commute to a distance, to realise her identification with Malaysian cultural differences.

'But I am aware of the culture differences when I watch the show (*Oprah*). If I were to watch, let's say, the topic being discussed by Mahadzir Lokman in *Global*, the same topic, and the same topic in *Oprah Winfrey* I would believe what is said in Mahadzir's show would be more real to me than what is said in Oprah's show, because her context is American.' (USM5)

People can exercise a playful consciousness in commuting televisually from universal to more specific perceptions of significance. As I've been arguing, 'play' also provides an appropriate model of interactive (virtual) travel associated with the 'information super-highway'. As on the contemporary urban 'freeway', excessive activity or 'play' on a talkshow or the internet can inhibit the very communication it seeks to achieve. 'It always gets heated up at the end of the show when everybody wants to say something, but, we have to end it.'(Lokman) Commuting grinds to a halt.

Not only do those who use the internet commute on the highway, they also commute to and from absorption in its many would-be compelling sites. Again, global involvement is played against membership of the culturally local, producing 'both differentiation from, and a sense of belonging to, the global order' (Mee 1996, 2). Mee has usefully referred to this phenomenon as exemplifying double identification. In this 'dual orientation' or 'double vision' (Mee), cross-cultural meaning can, as I described in earlier chapters, be 'brought back home', but also resisted in preference to the local. Like the woman student watching *Oprah*, 'it orients them to learn and assimilate from abroad without losing a sense of their Malaysian identity' (ibid, 8). Cross-cultural competence is 'heightened'.

Finally, research for this volume suggested that different talkshow formats can be found in the United States and Malaysia. On the one hand, the apparently egalitarian exchanges between host and participants in American shows are a useful model for investigating the interactions associated with on-line moderated discussion groups. On the other, the more formal Malaysian talkshow displayed a hierarchical mode of interacting, where those involved retained their distance. Here knowledge issued from experts in a diffusion process, offering a heuristic analogy allowing exploration of the ways in which information can be distributed from an on-line source.
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