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JUST TALK?
ANTHROPOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE
OBJECT OF MEDIA STUDIES IN INDONESIA

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Paper to
the Small Conference on

Asian Media/Practice:
Rethinking Communication and Media Research in Asia

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ABSTRACT
An interesting issue in Media and Communication Studies is how they are to define their object of study and for what purposes. The notion of practice as the object of study has become increasingly popular, but it is unclear what is meant by practice, as opposed simply to structure, how would one go about studying it and how such studies would relate to existing kinds of analysis.

One answer to these questions given by critical cultural and media studies' specialists has been the call for ethnography. As an anthropologist I am particularly interested in this ethnographic turn, which is both potentially important and fraught with difficulty.

In my paper I shall consider the implications of treating practice, namely media-related practices, as the object of contemporary media studies. Reviewing the media in terms of practice brings some surprises. Notably very little has been written about two kinds of practice in which producers, distributors and recipients of contemporary mass media spend much of their time. That is in meetings and in commenting on the media. The issue of commentary raises interesting and important questions. For instance, to what extent is it possible to talk about media, or media practices, without including commentary as constitutive? What is the relationship of commentary to articulation (and in which sense of articulation)? Who is entitled to comment and under what circumstances? And does commentary really matter to the study of the structures and processes of contemporary mass media institutions in Pacific Asia?
I shall argue that commentary is central to media-related practices in ways which may require us significantly to rethink how we study communication and media. At present, I suggest, there is a bias towards privileging the producers' accounts of how media work at the expense of viewers' roles. Such a bias towards productivism is itself a political articulation and so in need of critical analysis. I shall argue that relinquishing the hegemony of productivism shows the study of media, as we approach the millenium, to be more complex and uncertain than we might wish to imagine.

By Mark Hobart

In the summer of 1997, I engaged in a series of conversations with a small group of Balinese villagers about how contemporary mass media were affecting their lives, a topic on which people wax lyrical. One evening the discussion took an interesting turn. Let me give brief extracts.¹

An Ex-Village Headman: If you ask my opinion, if things carry on for a long time like this. Our grandchildren will be in difficulties, if there isn't – what do you call it?

An Old Actor: Turmoil. If there isn't turmoil, so that everything starts afresh...

Self: What do you mean by 'turmoil'?

Actor: It is everything turned upside down, destruction.

Self: But what's the use of a war?

Ex-Head: Its use is that everything starts all over again. After a fresh beginning things are ordered again... You can't get, as you do now, people 'buffaloing'.

Self: What's 'buffaloing'?

Ex-Head: It's a proverb: those who are already too big just get bigger. Ordinary people can do nothing.

Actor: It's already too late. They can't lift a finger.

Ex-Head: For example, they're like tiny insects, they count for nothing. Even if I spoke up and said this or that, no one would pay any attention.

Actor: The poor are useless. No one believes them. The rich never think of actually talking with the poor. If possible, they keep as far away from them as they can, where the rich can talk among themselves about whatever. I don't think that the poor could succeed in speaking. Even if they did, they are worth nothing, no one is listening.

Ex-Head: They show the good life on television. They provide images of beautiful things, so that those without will strive for them. The only problem is that they can't succeed.

Actor: They haven't the wherewithall.

Ex-Head: Yes, it's hard. Why? You can say people these days, it's like advertisements. Why should government promote television

¹ The evening's discussion is laid out and analyzed at length in Hobart (in press[a]). For exposition here, I have edited the dialogue, which involved three principal speakers. These were an ex-headman of the village where I work, an old theatre actor (now in his nineties) and a female actress-dancer in her late twenties and the daughter-in-law of the ex-headman. The fact that all three are actors is not coincidental, as will become apparent.

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the whole time and only broadcast what comes across as good? But what's bad is not, or is rarely, shown. The theory is fine...

**Actor:** But the practice is a very far cry from that.

**Ex-Head:** The practice is rotten. It is tantalizing the masses, goading them on, so that they will want to slave away.

**Actor:** So that they'll be joyful, for example so that they will do what they're told is right.

**Ex-Head:** Yes. But afterwards there is the practice, which is different. For example, consider people going on transmigration. They never show transmigrants starving. It's always people who...

**Actor:** Who are happy.

**Young Dancer:** ‘Successful’!

**Ex-Head:** Just the ones who have made it. A lot of people have been duped that way.

Among the points the commentators made were that serious unrest was not just impending, but necessary to rectify the excessive inequalities between people. The relationship between the élite and ordinary people had broken down irremediably. There was no connection between the political ideology and images disseminated on television and how the élite operated in practice. The poor were not just dispossessed, but have been rendered inarticulate. Mass communication, on this account, was mass miscommunication and the silencing of the masses.

When I wrote the original analysis of these conversations for a collection on the impact of globalization in Bali in the late twentieth century (Connor & Rubinstein in press), it was politely received and put as the last chapter, a sort of appendix to the more serious matters of Bali’s place in contemporary Indonesia. After all, what did the musings of a few Balinese villagers really add up to? As the volume was going to press a year later, the riots in Indonesia happened, and the publishers were suddenly anxious for more details. What the commentators had to say was no longer a mere ethnographic curiosity: they had predicted what the mass media and many serious intellectual authorities had failed to. Moreover, these villagers had anticipated much of the subsequent media commentary within Indonesia and abroad, which relegates the vast majority of the population as ‘masses’ or ‘the poor’, who have to be spoken for because they are – or, rather, have been made – inarticulate.
Why might it matter?

In a conference devoted to the major issue of rethinking approaches to research on Asian media, you might be wondering why I am worrying about the opinions of a handful of Indonesian villagers. What, after all, except trivially have they to do with the topic? I hope to show that what ordinary viewers have to say requires us to rethink the object of study in communication and media research, and so what we are doing.

Such rethinking - a paradigmatic shift, if you will - is, I suggest, overdue. While communications' and media research in Asia may just be getting under way, certainly compared to Europe and, especially, the United States, that does not entail it must follow on behind theoretically. Anyway, to what extent are existing approaches Eurocentric, whether in the particular circumstances of inquiry or in their assumptions? And, if so, how appropriate are they to the study of a rapidly changing Pacific Asia? What is involved is not just a more sensitive appreciation of differences of degree and kind, but of the criteria of analysis themselves. To move towards such an appreciation requires, I argue, a radical rethinking of the object of study from a stress upon structures and institutions to a stress on practice. To argue the case requires, I am afraid, a fairly lengthy theoretical preamble. (If you wish to avoid this, skip straight to the section on Critical commentary in print and on television.)

Even were it desirable, is it possible to avoid Eurocentrism? After all are the modes of inquiry and the academic institutions themselves not inescapably ‘Western’? Against this there is a long history of discussion, argument and reflection about Asian media, not least by the media themselves. This kind of production by, and commentary on, the media is what Ron Inden and I have called ‘inter-media’. Whatever may be the case for other disciplines, academics are latecomers to the media feast. It looks snobbish to insist that you cannot contribute intellectually if you don’t conform to a particular, and fairly traditional, élite’s idealization of its own theoretical practices. To do so not only excludes those who are ‘organically’ engaged (Gramsci 1971), whether as producers, audiences or critics, but ignores the fact that thinking itself changes.
Media versus Communications’ studies

How might differences between communications’ and media studies bear on such issues? What do these differences actually boil down to in Asia in mid-1999? What happens if, instead of attempting to explain everything using the old, formal dichotomy of theory and methodology, we inquire about differences in intellectual practices and their genealogies?

Among the questions we are invited to think about at this conference is how to imagine differences between critical-cultural and empirical schools of study. I have two speculative thoughts. First, are they different phases of inquiry? The Oxford philosopher, R.G. Collingwood, argued that mathematical (or empirical) and philosophical inquiry are distinct. If you are researching into, say, television-viewing or the ownership of mobile phones, it makes sense in the first instance to assume you can work with, and allocate empirical evidence into, distinct classes (what constitutes ownership, viewing, social class, occupation, etc.). In short, when you begin to inquire about a phenomenon, you assume that it is studiable in terms of discrete and unambiguous categories. When you have reasonably established what sort of phenomena you are dealing with, a different phase of inquiry begins, in which you start to reflect on what it is you have established. This latter Collingwood called the ‘philosophical’ phase of concepts, where categories overlap and do not permit of closure. The question then becomes: what significance do the findings have for our broader understanding (1933: 26-53)? Such critical reflection may well lead to asking new questions and so a new phase of empirical inquiry. Is this distinction a useful way to consider differences between empirical and critical cultural schools of thought?

Rephrasing the difference between schools as one of practices of inquiry raises the question of what are the implications and consequences of adopting one approach rather than another? The differences here are at once theoretical and practical. In other words, they are what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe called ‘antagonistic’

2 Ron Inden, as a historian, has been reviewing some of the earlier writings. He has noted two quite distinct genealogies recur regularly: a mathematical genealogy (e.g. Shannon & Weaver, 1949); and hermeneutic one, which stresses persuasion and propaganda. As far as I know these are woven equally through communication and media studies.
(1985: 93-148). This notion of antagonism is designed to overcome the dichotomy between logical contradiction and social conflict (mind versus body and so forth) by involving both at the same time. Antagonism goes further though. On this account, by its nature, society does not submit to a single explanation, because it is neither a total, nor a coherent, entity (Laclau 1990a.). Insofar as media and communication are social activities, the same holds for them. There are always antagonistic explanations of society and social action. So

antagonism as the negation of a given order is, quite simply, the limit of that order, and not the moment of a broader totality in relation to which the two poles of the antagonism would constitute differential – i.e. objective – partial instances (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 126).

In reflecting on differences between communications’ and media studies, we shall land up considering the limits of each in understanding the media ‘order’ in contemporary Pacific Asia.

Quite what would constitute an antagonism remains a problem. As Laclau is arguing against earlier Marxist thinkers, his examples of antagonisms often draw upon differences of class and relations of production. In view of recent work in cultural and media studies, gender, ethnicity and other modes of differentiating humans as subjects, such as sexual orientation, age and appearance, or by access to kinds of knowledge might be equally pertinent.

Returning for a moment to Indonesian television and the Balinese commentators, an obvious question is: how are two quite different ways of representing the polity in the mass media related? The first is a hierarchical model of social and cosmic division of labour in which different kinds of beings have exclusive functions. The second is what, for lack of a better expression, I shall call a democratic capitalist model. They are not simply related as ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ models, because

3 The classical reference is probably Shärer’s account in Ngaju religion. (H)adat has a double meaning. Firstly that of divine cosmic order and harmony, and secondly that of life and actions in agreement with this order. It is not only humanity that possesses hadat, but also every other creature or thing (animal, plant, ricer etc.) in very phenomenon (e.g. celestial phenomena), every period and every action, for the entire cosmos is ordered by the total godhead and every member and every part of the cosmos possesses its own place in this order, allocated by the total godhead, and has to live and act

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both have long been invoked in Indonesian political discourse. What each involves depends on who is representing it, as what, under what circumstances – which is where the mass media come in. Antagonisms arise not within the respective models, which are arguably internally consistent, but in two different ways. First, in social life humans as social agents are caught up in complex and untidy relationships, which are not reducible simply to neat logical structures of classes, roles etc. Second, even in the classic case of a worker selling her labour in the market, that does not in itself make the capitalist relationships of production intrinsically antagonistic (Laclau 1990b: 9). Extrinsic factors, such as a fall in the standard of living in the model of capital or the manifest abuse of reciprocal obligations according to the social and cosmic order, bring about antagonisms. The latter point was clearly stated by the Balinese commentators. The glaring disparities of wealth and life choices, which daily confront Indonesian television viewers, expose the limits of both orders.

This brings us finally to the issue of hegemony. On this account it rests upon antagonism. Hegemony is how the imbalance between the poles of the antagonism is articulated at any moment.

Hegemony supposes the incomplete and open character of the social, that it can take place only in a field dominated by articulatory practices. This, however, immediately poses the problem: who is the articulating subject? (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 134).

So the social is the product of articulatory practices, notably by the media. Several questions then arise. Who, or what, are the agents of these hegemonic articulations? How would we set about studying them? What is the role of academics in researching and writing about, and so articulating these articulatory practices? And how do the kinds of articulation communications’ studies scholars make differ from those of according to this ordained place. Only living and acting in and by this hadat (we may also say total godhead) guarantees harmony’ (1963: 74-75).

4 Not only is ‘tradition’ notoriously invented, but in an archipelago as vast as Indonesia, whose tradition is contested. To the extent that it is Javanese (an equally problematic category, Pemberton 1994), as Pramoedya Ananta Toer argued at length in his Bum Quartet, it is hardly the venerable lineage it has subsequently been made out to be. It surfaces perhaps most obviously in the practices of officialdom (pegawai) and the associated paternalism (Asal Bapak Senang, so long as the Boss is happy). In all this there are echoes here of an essentialized appeal to ‘Asian values’, itself just as problematic (Chua 1995: 100-123). It is not clear that the ‘modern’ antithesis is much less ambiguous. There is therefore always a constitutive outside inherent in any antagonistic relationship (Laclau 1990a: 9). The notion of a constitutive outside, which Laclau derives from Henry Staten’s (1986)

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media studies’ scholars? And, finally, what is the relationship of academics to the articulating subjects and to the objects of articulation?

Practice versus structure

Few words have been used as indiscriminately in recent years as practice. The phrase ‘media practices’ falls easily off the lips, but what exactly do those who use it mean by it? In the absence of a coherent account of practice as an ontological object, it seems to connote little more than a disaffection with the formalist vocabulary of structure and process, with perhaps a frisson of political radicalism by association with the almost equally problematic Marxist notion of praxis. A workable account of practice however might bridge some differences between empirical and critical approaches to media. Practice invites empirical research, but extends to include the intellectual practices of the researchers, so making the study critical. The scope for historical and ethnographic study into media-related practices is vast and may be worth considering in this conference. This is not to suggest that practice is a notion without problems, which will become more apparent once critical reflection on research begins. However, in terms of the new kinds of research, which it makes possible, it seems worth serious engagement.

Are there not existing theories of practice on which we might draw? What, for instance, of the work of Pierre Bourdieu? For various reasons, nicely argued in Richard Jenkins’s book on him, Bourdieu never addresses the radical ontological problems, which a more rigorous account of practice would require. Instead he uses practice to supplement the inadequacies of structure, as a prop to compensate for the more glaring inadequacies of structural frameworks. (Bourdieu retains a surprisingly conservative ontology: consider, for instance, symbolic capital or the implicit dichotomy of a ‘theory of practice’, 1977.) We have to turn to the work of Foucault to find a serious analysis of practice, with a recognition of the radicality demanded by philosophical pragmatism, because the knowing subject of the scholar becomes part

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of the problem. I take Foucault’s shift from an archaeological to a genealogical method to be such an attempt (e.g. 1977b). As he made clear in his late essay, *The subject and power*, Foucault was particularly interested in the different modes by which human beings are made subjects and are transformed – or transform themselves – through their knowing practices (1982: 208). The media, I suggest, are such a mode. And they involve two related sets of practices: those by which people change themselves or are changed; and those by which they become an object of study through their implication, or engagement, in the media.

Rather than talk of ‘media practices’, I prefer the expression ‘media-related practices’. It may be the residual anthropologist in me, but it is the range of contexts and situations in which media become relevant, which seem as interesting as what goes on in the media themselves. Anyway it is hard to determine where you would draw the boundary. If housewives cook to have meals ready for the family to watch television, or families save to buy a new set, media conglomerates deciding strategies to increase market share or what politicians say – and more importantly don’t say – seems as interesting to me as media practices more narrowly defined. On this

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6 Foucault put it neatly:

Theory does not express, translate, or serve to apply practice: it is practice. But it is local and regional...not totalizing. This is a struggle against power, a struggle aimed at revealing and undermining power where it is most invisible and insidious. It is not to “awaken consciousness” that we struggle (the masses have been aware for some time that consciousness is a form of knowledge; and consciousness as the basis of subjectivity is a prerogative of the bourgeoisie), but to sap power, to take power; it is an activity conducted alongside those who struggle for power, and not their illumination from a safe distance. A “theory” is the regional system of this struggle (Foucault 1977a: 208).

Foucault was, then, clear that an analysis based on practice upset the cosy relationship of intellectuals with their object of study, a point we might wish to consider for media studies. I take practice to be a recognized set of actions which affects the world or agents, or commonly both in differing degree and kind. Activities I consider to be congeries of actions in which people engage either less formally or where not much is changed by doing so. Sitting university finals exams and going fishing are examples of a practice and an activity respectively. As we shall see, under what circumstances commentary is a practice as against an activity, may be crucial.

The OED lists the following pertinent senses.

2.a. The habitual doing or carrying on of something; usual, customary, or constant action; action as distinguished from profession, theory, knowledge, etc.; conduct.  
b. Law The method of procedure used in the law-courts.  
c. A habitual way or mode of acting; a habit, custom; (with pl.) something done constantly or usually; a habitual action. There is also thought the sense of acquiring a skill, which changes the person through this practice. For example, 3: The doing of something repeatedly or continuously by way of study; exercise in any art, handicraft, etc., for the purpose, or with the result, of attaining proficiency; hence, the practical acquaintance with or experience in a subject or process, so gained. (See also 9 c.) 5: spec. The carrying on or exercise of a profession or occupation, esp. of law, surgery, or medicine; the professional work or business of a lawyer or medical man.
account media-related practices do not form a closed field: they are incomplete and open.

How does a concern with practice differ from other ways of conceiving of the object of media studies? It is an attempt to break away from a long-standing explanatory dichotomy between structure on the one hand and individual agency on the other (replicated, for example, in Giddens’ theory of structuration, 1984), as if these were the only alternatives. Instead of the object of inquiry being timeless and unsituated, the shift in emphasis is to more historical and anthropological concerns, perhaps crudely summed up in such questions as: What happened, and what was presupposed, on particular occasions? Who represented this as being what, and under what circumstances? Applied to media, the second pair of questions is significant because, on most interpretations, they involve communication and mediation and so take us to inter-media. Inquiry into practice then assumes some kind of prior inquiry into the structure and organization of media. However it marks a break in other ways. Theoretically, it questions many of the presuppositions of its predecessors and so is often designated ‘post-structuralist’ (or, less satisfactorily, ‘postmodernist’, on why see, for instance, Baudrillard 1993).

As the term suggests, such an approach aims to go beyond ideas of structure and its allied concepts, whether formal, such as system, or distributional, as in (social) organization, or supplementary, as are ideas of process or dynamics. Socially, structure is not a natural fact. When we describe the media in terms of institutions or legal corporations, we are invoking a culturally and historically specific genealogy of argument. Similarly, if we are studying, say, patterns of cinema-going in India or sampling responses to television programmes in Singapore, as Ian Hacking pointed out (1990), we are invoking a kind of fact invented in mid nineteenth-century Europe: the statistical fact or the normal. If we are considering the impact of entertainment media on audiences, then we are assuming some account of agency.

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8 ‘Who’ here questions the kind of agent. This need not be an individual person, but may well be complex and changing grouping (Hobart 1990).

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In media and cultural studies, structure stands in an ambivalent relationship to culture, the semiotic, or meaning. At one extreme, structure (often linked in some way with the ‘hard’, masculine realities of economics and politics) determines, or at least is a good way of explaining, culture (as ‘soft’, malleable, feminine). At another, culture is the domain of human imagination, through which humans free themselves from, and come to understand the workings of, structure itself. More radically, structure stands in opposition to contingency, to the questioning of the predictability or explicable in the last resort of what happens (Laclau 1990b). It is the activity of the knowing subject upon the world, which creates, or reveals, that structure. So recourse to structure opposes the knower to the known. The sort of analysis of practice I am advocating takes issue with all these assumptions.

Some brief examples from cultural studies may make the point. A feature of the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was the extent to which it enshrined and played with, rather than transcended, the dichotomy between cultural voluntarism and structural determination (exemplified in Hall 1980). As Chen has pointed out, cultural studies has notably failed to address the potentially radical dissolution of its constitutive categories by post-structuralism (1996).

The problems surface in McGuigan’s criticisms of popular culture and cultural populism. For instance McGuigan complains of Fiske’s work on television (1987), that he

\[\text{says next to nothing about institutional change in television during the 1980s: vital issues to do with de-regulation / re-regulation and technology, for instance, are simply banished since, for Fiske, they are not pertinent to questions of interpretation...}\]

Following Bourdieu, Fiske separates ‘the cultural economy’ (symbolic exchange between texts and audiences) from ‘the financial economy’ (where the television industry is located). Fiske believes it is completely unnecessary to interpret the meaning of the former in relation to the commercial operations of the latter...

A satisfactory theory of television, I would suggest, needs to account for the multi-dimensional interaction of production and consumption at both economic and symbolic levels, giving due weight to textual diversity and audience differences, as Fiske rights recommends (McGuigan 1992: 71-72).

The trouble is that McGuigan, in a blast from the past, reinscribes the dichotomy he attacks Fiske for and cheerfully reifies the economic, symbolic, production,
consumption, audiences and so on. Although McGuigan might seem here to give
equal weight to the economic and symbolic, the point of the book is to remind readers
just how far popular culture is in the grip of powerful and determining economic
structures. In practice however, commercial interests cannot simply be separated
from ‘content’. And what exactly are scholars doing when they dichotomize the
economic and semantic? For all their claim to radicalism, most of the protagonists in
the debates around cultural studies seem firmly entrenched in the metaphysics of a
Eurocentric modernism.

Am I not just reifying practice in a new set of objects, such as ‘commentary’? I
think not. An interesting aspect of recent work on audiences is precisely that it does
not attempt to essentialize the audience as a natural object. Instead it considers those
practices of media institutions, governments, academics and others, through which
they describe, survey and imagine in different ways audiences as different kinds of
entities (e.g. Ang 1991, 1996; Hartley 1992, 1999; Morley 1992; for Indonesia, see
Kitley 1998). Similarly we should equally avoid essentializing differences between
producers, distributors and audiences. Producers regularly meet as audiences to view
and judge their own, and competitors’, productions.

The claims of commentary

Rethinking the object of media studies as those practices which go on in and
around the mass media suddenly makes it clear how much we still have to inquire
about. Practice is often invoked as a way, as Ien Ang nicely put it, of ‘desperately
seeking the audience’. While it is the complexities of researching audiences, which
has attracted the most attention, ethnographic studies of how different kinds of media
production or distribution actually work, as opposed to how they are supposed to
work, proves just as informative and surprising. A research student of mine, Maureen
O’Farrell has just completed fieldwork on the shooting of Tales of the Arabian Nights
in Turkey. Her work suggests studies of how producers actually work is as exotic,
unexpected and interesting as any classic ethnographic study. Because we have been
so focused up the media as structures and organizations, I am not sure that we yet
have much idea what kinds of practices to look for and which might prove important.
Among the many practices which make up contemporary mass media, some are reflective. That is they are about the practices themselves. Just as a crucial, indeed constitutive, set of media practices frame, represent, modify and articulate events, actions, texts or what have you, these practices comment on and articulate these articulatory practices. In this sense they are meta-practices, meaning not of some higher order, but simply ones that come after. I shall use ‘commentary’ here as a way in singling out those kinds of practice, the constitutive purpose of which is to comment on previous practices of articulation. Representation and commentary both supplement what they refer to, but to some extent in different ways. As Goodman has noted, representing works by eliminating most information and by transforming what remains (1968). A picture represents something as something else. Commentary seems to expand on or modify such representations.⁹

Why should this framing and reframing be necessary at all? I take it, following Quine (1953, 1960), that events and actions are under-determined. That is, for any set of facts, there are a variety of ways you can explain, interpret or understand what is going on, each of which make sense of those facts, even if in different and incompatible ways. One of the more unnerving experiences of fieldwork by participant-observation is that when you have observed something important happening, you have to rush up and ask what it is that you have just witnessed is all about. Events do not explain themselves. The kinds of closure, well described in studies of television production (e.g. Fiske 1987), perhaps especially for the news (Fiske & Hartley 1978), are ways of determining, at least for a moment, what is otherwise undecidable. Even news stories, arguably among the most structured of genres, leave themselves open to all sorts of possible interpretations. Commentaries often restrict the possibility of dissemination. One way they do so is by telling you the context or the situation, which is relevant to understand the facts, tell you what sort of facts they are, the kind and degree of reliance and the kind of understanding – in other words, how to understand them.

⁹ The OED defines commentary as: ‘3. a. A treatise consisting of a systematic series of comments or annotations on the text of a literary work; an expository treatise following the order of the work explained.’

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Commentaries do not always over-determine. They may do the opposite. Confronted with a definite-looking fact, a commentator may show that things are not what they seem. Anyway, the trouble with determinations is that those who may enunciate usually do not manage to agree among themselves. For instance, as I write NATO is engaged in what it describes in the media as the ‘strategic bombing’ of Serbia. The spokesmen for the NATO governments stress the necessity for moral action in the face of the iniquity of the Serbian political leadership (synecdochically, Slobodan Milosevic), while Edward Said has written that this as an excuse for the Americans to show their military and political power. What most accounts share, although Said will not like this, is that they depend upon a narrative of purpose, structure, morality. The antagonisms point neatly to the limits of order: the foundational order, or myth, of Western civilization. What must be suppressed is that the combination of many of the world’s most powerful polities, the culmination of centuries of European rational thought, which have produced an awesome military-industrial machine to back that world-ordering rationality, should be in this mess and have not much clue how to get out of it without looking ridiculous. A recent review (an inter-media product) in The Observer of a new biography of Milosevic by Robert Thomas (in passing notes that both Milosevic’s parents and favourite uncle committed suicide) raises the question of whether there is any great plan at all, or could Milosevic just be driven by the contingent need to try to keep in power (Glenny 1999: 11)?

At a later stage it might be useful to consider the kinds of commentary which occur in contemporary Asian mass media, or rather review those practices which may usefully be considered as commentary. Stuart Hall’s argument that there are distinct ‘dominant-hegemonic’, ‘negotiated’ and ‘oppositional’ readings of media ‘messages’ (1980b) is one distinction. It is too determinate and unsituated for my taste. Not only are there presumably as many ways of commenting as there illocutionary functions (in Searle’s 1971 sense), but presumably a commentary may combine several such functions. So, for the moment, I wish to leave the notion of commentary open and not anticipate where inquiry will lead.
Re-appraising existing work in terms of commentary already suggests new possibilities. What are asking viewers their thoughts on Dallas or conducting surveys by questionnaire about Singaporean TV if not a highly structured invitations to different kinds of commentary? And what are trade journals doing if they are not adding commentary? If you stop and think about it, one of the main activities of the mass media is commenting on their own productions and those of other media. The variety is surprising. It ranges from the obvious to the less obvious. It would have to include newspaper reviews of films and television programmes, the writings of media correspondents, trailers and promotions, trade and in-house journals and fanzines, films and television programmes about making films and broadcasts, and web sites for computer and media fans, and much else besides.

Commentaries are remarkably pervasive. But what we actually know is less the product of carefully tailored footage of images and voices than of commentaries. No day goes past without politicians, generals and experts telling us what is really happening. As Alex Thomson remarked recently in The Guardian:

How rarely do we hear anyone on TV prefacing a report from NATO or the MoD by saying “none of the claims from the briefers can be independently verified”or even reporting what they as claims which they are, rather than facts which they are not (Thomson 1999: 6-7).

As we know from the Gulf War, what we see on our television screens is not what took place but, as Baudrillard noted (1995), images selected to confer actuality and authenticity upon the commentaries. (The point of Baudrillard’s notion of simulacra is to question what determines the relationship between image and reality, see 1983: 11.) The point is clear from Fiske and Hartley’s notion of claw-back in news (1978: 86-87), by which eye-witnesses’ and on-the-spot reporters’ accounts are subordinate to, and structured by, the studio presenter’s commentary.10 One person’s fact is someone-more-powerful’s commentary. So is it surprising that, when events are imagined to matter, political commentators – for whom, significantly, we use the term

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10 Fiske and Hartley, writing over twenty years ago, make the point that, to break from ideological and psychological accounts of television, ‘requires that we concentrate on the messages and their language as much as on the institutions that produce them, and on the audience response as much as on the communicator’s intentions’ (1978: 85). Claw-back exemplifies the way in which mass media pre-interpret and frame events by commenting on them.
‘pundits’ – hurl themselves into the breach with a self-sacrificing devotion worthy of Orientalist imaginings of the Juggernaut?

Who then is empowered to comment, about what and under what circumstances? What the village commentators had to say was marginal to much communications’ and media studies, not because of what they said (that, later, excited the publishers), but because of who they were or, rather, were not. Had they been recognized political commentators (who, for reasons of personal safety, were notably quiet), they would probably have been hailed for their perspicacity. So what is informed commentary and what mere opinion, idle speculation or empty chatter would seem to depend on who says it. No prizes for guessing who usually gets left out.

A point of some significance is that an analysis in terms of practice may fit at least some genealogical strands of Asian philosophical thinking rather better than the present options. Certainly critical thinking about, and use of, commentary is highly developed, as Richard Fox shows in work he is currently completing. And Adiya Dev Sood, a student of Ron Inden, has reviewed Indian philosophical thinking about the nature of language, as exemplified in grammar, translation and commentary. As Sood notes, most theories of translation ‘are predicated on the question of fidelity to the original text, which is almost by definition absent’. By contrast, Anuvada, ‘after-speech...is a dialogue of the present speaker with the received text’ (n.d. 3). So elucidation or commentary, vyakarana (Old Javanese: wyakarana) supplements and becomes part of the text-as-a-whole. I am not arguing that there is some timeless, generic ‘Asian’ mode of thought, which underwrites this account of commentary. However fairly evidently there has been much interesting thinking about the nature of commentary and its relationship to what it comments on, which has been largely neglected in communication and media studies in Asia.

Let me now turn to how different kinds of media address themselves to recipients, how they imagine and situate themselves as producers and the kinds of commentary in which they are engaged. All the materials cited refer in some way to Indonesian television. I provide the original text and transcriptions of television
footage in Appendix A. I shall show the video clips of the relevant extracts during the conference.

Critical commentary in print and on television

**Example 1: Viewers’ rights**

With the emergence of commercial channels in Indonesia, state television, TVRI, lost more than its monopoly. It lost its position as the sole enunciator in free-to-air television broadcasting. Despite the fact that all channels are required to transmit hard news from TVRI, they have increasingly experimented with ‘soft’ news programmes, if nothing else in order to capture a share of a rapidly differentiating market (Kitley 1998: 283-301). So, paradoxically in their broadcasts, television companies owned largely by the presidential family and their friends have landed up supporting values antithetical to those which brought about their rise.

The first example of commentary is from *Vista-TV*, a fortnightly up-market consumer magazine produced in Jakarta and primarily devoted to Indonesian television. Its broad slant was in favour of the ‘freedom’, which commercial competition was bringing to Indonesia. It ran for about three years before ceasing production in the summer of 1997. A significant part of *Vista-TV* consisted in intermedia materials. There were regular reviews of forthcoming films and series, but also articles on Indonesian films, television production and viewing in Indonesia. The edition for the second half of August 1996 for instance had double spreads on *The gulf between television and viewers, Idealism as the broadcaster’s dilemma, Picking up the television world of the future, When shall we get those rights? and What is the fate of our children?* A translation of the opening two paragraphs of *When shall we get those rights?* and a resume of the insert specifying the rights are included in

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11 One reason for allowing commercial competition was that satellite dishes were becoming increasingly common and the stranglehold on news, at least for the wealthier middle classes, was no longer possible. Although radio and the print media offered some alternative, depending on the degree of prevailing censorship, the Indonesian government has always tended to subscribe to a ‘hypodermic’ model of the effects of television and been particularly sensitive about its imputed ‘influence’.

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Appendix A. It was written under the rather mysterious pseudonym *Cipta Peranginangin* (‘War of the wind’)?

The piece starts by questioning the implications of the expansion of commercial television in the early 1990s (when state television, TVRI, lost its monopoly). By the second paragraph, the author’s – and presumably the editor’s - position is made quite clear: state television is the voice of the government. Government’s monopoly not only meant criticisms were ignored, but enabled them to purvey a monopolistic view of the world. This forced viewers into interpreting critically whatever they were broadcast. This demand on audiences is turned neatly to the question of people’s rights, as consumers. Framed within the article is a statement of what viewers’ rights are, starting, significantly, with the statement that the protection of these rights does not differ greatly from developed countries like America. So where they stand on the apparent distinction between modern versus Asian values is clear.

The article assumes that the facts are not transparent, but require commentary. Commentary is necessary here for two reasons. Much of the article is given to contextualizing the issues. Citing a number of senior figures in the media, the assumption is that viewers do not have access to the relevant background. Facts do not just not speak for themselves, but viewers are being deprived of the facts, which the article goes on to provide and question. The producers claim democratic credentials, which they link to, or at least voice in the language of, consumerism. The author positions him- or herself as at once well-informed, open and questioning. Correspondingly readers are assumed to be capable of being engaged in argument and of thinking for themselves. Aimed, it would seem, at intelligent readers and Indonesia’s emerging middle classes, it avoids crude gender divisions and carefully includes issues particular to women viewers. There is a stark contrast to the presentation of official commentary (see Example 5), which commonly situates viewers or readers as subjects, who are to be informed and who are expected to accept what they hear. The relation of author and readers in the *Vista-TV* piece is of co-agents. Journalists, or media professionals, have to work together with viewers to

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12 I am grateful to Sallehudin bin Haji Abdullah Sani for checking my Indonesian translations.
ensure the enjoyment of the rights they have. The parties have complementary roles to play in so doing. Commentary here is part of a critique of the present state of affairs and is aimed at changing them.

*Example 2: A popular song against the New Order régime*

News footage of events in and around the Indonesian parliament building in May 1998 shows a pop band singing to the crowds. They appeared in the summer on the commercial channel Indosiar on 19th July in a show called *Saksi* (Witness). *Saksi* was one of a new genre, where public figures were invited to answer questions from studio audiences, significantly mostly composed of students, whose activities, of course, had brought down President Suharto. The band, Ully and the Reform Group, sang two songs during interludes. The lyrics of both songs were unequivocally a commentary on the doings of the New Order régime. The refrain of the first, to a catchy tune, ran ‘*Tari-tari korupsi lagu-lagu kolusi, musiknya nepotisme*’, ‘dances of corruption, songs of collusion, the music of nepotism’. In a spoken interlude, the song picked up nicely on the role of fear in the Indonesian polity.

The students are afraid of the lecturers, the lecturers are afraid of the deans, the deans are afraid of the rectors, the rectors are afraid of the ministers, the ministers are afraid of the President...and the President is afraid of the students!

The second song, ‘Greetings Fellow Citizens’ was addressed to the *Bapak-Bapak*, the Bosses, the Great and Not-So-Good (Appendix A). It advised them to remember the little people, about whose livelihoods and self-respect they have been so careless. It warned against the best known forms of corruption among the powerful. Echoing the reformers who were calling for a return to the rule of law in Indonesia, it reminded the powerful that the country was not their private property to do with as they saw fit.

The dress and style of the band, as well as the lyrics, placed them firmly in opposition to the powerful about whom they sang. The words of the songs were not only clear, but sub-titled as well. So the commentary, addressed at once to the big

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bosses and the viewing public at large, was unequivocal, as was the singers’ placing themselves as little people. The song commented openly, with examples, of the kinds of abuse about which everyone has been talking for years but, until very recently, had not dared say in public, far less on prime time television. While positioning itself in opposition to the régime, the song’s theme was not punishment, but the need to remember shared humanity: that everyone had the right to make a living, to dignity and to enjoy the rule of law. As a commentary, the song is determinative: it makes the unspoken explicit and issues a direct challenge to those still in power.

The limits of commentary

Earlier I suggested that commentaries often supplement some state of affairs which is open, by enunciating a determinate interpretation, less frequently by questioning. The Vista-TV article contextualized and questioned. The pop song gave substance to commonly known, but publicly unstated, facts before a mass audience. Both, in different ways, articulate opposition to a dominant position. Media studies’ writings have shown how dominant positions are inscribed in media productions (for television, see for instance Fiske 1987; Hartley 1982; Morley 1980;). How does this work for commentary?¹³

Example 3: The threatened bankruptcy of ANtive

My example is one of many similar kinds of piece in Television Asia, a glossy monthly trade magazine on Asian television, written in English and produced in Singapore, with offices in London and New York. It is about the problems for one of several commercial television companies following the financial crisis in Indonesia.

In the section entitled ‘Review’, there is a short report on the repayment problems of one of the previously flourishing Indonesian commercial television companies, ANtive. Why though do I include this in a piece about commentary? At first sight,

¹³ I deliberately choose two pieces from trade and consumer magazines, because these are a source of rich intermedia commentary.
this is a straightforward factual report of moves by foreign creditors to get their money back and ANteve's counter-proposal. What is distinctive is the apparent care taken to keep rigorously to the 'neutral' economic and legal facts and to avoid voicing any opinions, framing remarks or even any context at all.

It is precisely this absence which requires closer examination. Although ostensibly transparent and self-explanatory, you need a lot of background information, or 'inter-text', to make sense of what is going on. For a start, ANteve is owned by several wealthy Indonesian business men, including Bakrie, a close associate, and Sudwikatmono, a cousin, of former President Soeharto. Whatever the magazine's claim to present the economic facts, there is an important political sub-text. Here the missing context is vital. Only halfway through the piece does it get around to mentioning Asia's financial crisis, the failure to date of creditors successfully to file a bankruptcy petition and, obliquely, the problems the creditors face through being foreigners.

The report goes through contortions by omission to manage to exclude the obvious point that ANteve is a classic case of Indonesian crony capitalism. Linked to this is the problem that the courts have notoriously sided with the élite's interests. What is left out is that the protracted revolution through which Indonesia is (or is not) going is in part about the battle, at once economic and political, over who controls the assets of the big companies, which flourished under the political protection of, and underwrote, the New Order régime. Just like television news, this report, in seeming to stick rigidly to the facts and to avoid framing or explicating them, naturalizes a particular way of interpreting the world, and defines subject positions for both the writer and readers. The reader here has to be informed, English-speaking, wealthy (to be able to read and afford Television Asia), internationally-oriented and with some business or professional interest in the media. The writer's position is ambiguous: the 'objectivity' disguises several possibilities.

The scrupulously neutral tone exnominates the author (see Fiske 1987: 42-43, citing Barthes 1972: 138-42) and makes the interests and concerns of a particular class seem objective and natural. It is the familiar one of upper-middle class males.
The other obvious division, by ethnicity, is neatly sutured by the magazine by including all readers as part of an international – the hype is ‘global’ - élite. The objectivity is reinforced by appeal to the hegemonic language of globalization, in other words economics. It is as if markets, financing, supply and demand existed independently of arguments over the choice between alternative, and often incompatible, values and goals. Managing to ignore the battle about what kinds of political future the world’s fourth largest country (only some two kilometres from Singapore) should pursue and how, and to reduce the complexities to the bland language of the date on which bonds mature is a masterpiece of evasion. The efficacy of the commentary lies in its apparent absence, in enunciative closure taken to the extreme.  

Example 4: Corruption the Mahabharata and closer to home

When I arrived in Bali in the summer of 1991, the people I stayed with wanted to tell me about, and insisted I watch immediately, a play on television, Pandawa Asrama (the Pandawa’s retreat to the forest). It had been performed as part of the annual Bali Arts Festival and had just been broadcast in three episodes on the local channel of state television. The play was in a genre at the height of its popularity, Sëndrätari, a ‘ballet’ spectacular, performed by a large cast, with an orchestra and ranks of singers. The narration and voices of the dancers were all performed by a single person, known as the dalang, or puppeteer, by analogy with shadow theatre. The two main performing arts’academies, STSI and KOKAR, presented rival performances at the festival. What made KOKAR special was that their dalang was Dewa Madé Sayang, not only a superb performer, but a trenchant critic of abuses by those in high places. What excited everyone I spoke to was that he had done so in front of television cameras and before a large festival audience including many of his targets.

14 Presumably the limits here, which the report exposes, are those often identified as ‘Asian values’. Anwar Ibrahim, at least in retrospect, was quite happy to pull the plug on the naturalness and inevitability of such values (Extract from his article in Index on censorship in The Observer, 18th April 1999).
In the story, the Pandawa brothers are condemned to years of recluse in the forest, because the eldest, Yudistira, gambles the kingdom away to their rival cousins, the Korawa. Before the Pandawa accept the invitation, they meet the sage, Bagawan Biasa, who advises them of what it is to be good rulers and warns them of the grave consequences, not just for them but for their subjects, of doing otherwise. In 1991, when Déwa Madé Sayang executed this piece, commentary on the abuses of the President, his family and government officials was still muted: the sort of thing you talked about only in private among people you trusted. I translate the beginning of the scene in Appendix A.

In the extract, the sage expatiates on how to be a good king and the difficulties any ruler faces. He stresses the need for fairness; and alludes to the great polities of the past, which flourished because their subjects actively supported the ruler, as a consequence of his circumspection. In a sideswipe at events closer to home, the dalang implied, but never said explicitly, that the world of arts, and by extension Bali as a whole, exemplified a similarly rotten leadership. Switching back to Indonesia as a whole, he noted, again without saying so explicitly, that generosity and punishment should be judged by worth, not by family or favour.

The dalang placed himself here in a complex relationship with his audience. He spoke with great enunciative power: with the authority of having mastered the texts, of being qualified to judge their relevance to a broad range of circumstances, which the New Order élite might well regard as being beyond his prerogative. It is the blast of a modern – but also traditional – intellectual, who takes his lords and masters, and the intellectuals who serve them as well as those who stay quiet in opposition, to task for abject failure. But it is a failure, which has affected everyone who listens to him. Although the speech was intended and understood as a searing commentary on the régime, nationally and locally, at no point did Déwa Madé Sayang stray from what would have been entirely appropriate to say in the context of rulership in ancient India or Bali. At once he condemned a paternalistic régime, while himself arguably exemplifying a more benevolent, even-handed face of patriarchy. At the same time he deferred to the audience as to how they wish to take what has

15 Séndratari in many ways is identifiable as a New Order theatre form (Hough 1992).
been said. This last is not my imagination: people in the village were galvanized by what he said and there was a great deal of talk subsequently in the coffee stalls and other public places in the village.\footnote{16}

Now Dalang have long occupied a privileged, if sometimes precarious, position in Javanese and Balinese society as social commentators and critics. The plots are usually scenes extracted from the Indian epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, and extemporized into plays lasting several hours or, in Java, even days. I hope it has become clear why I was unwilling to classify kinds of commentary because, in shadow theatre — and in this instance in sêndratari — the commentary is in principle implicit and unstated. Unlike Europeans and Americans, who tend to assume the author or performer to be agent, Javanese and Balinese show appreciation of the active role of audiences. Puppeteers often draw more or less implicit comparisons between situations, problems, moral dilemmas and so forth in the texts and the circumstances at the time of performance. It is they who bring about the juxtaposition. But members of the audience have to draw their own inferences. The commentary is the more elegant and effective for being implicit, because each person can decide how it applies to their life circumstances.

But is this commentary? Everyone I spoke to certainly considered there to be. They drew my attention to another aspect, which I had overlooked. The speech was not simply a complaint, a public voicing. It was targeted at officials who were corrupt, who had favoured their families, who had failed to be fair. The expression used was negakin debong, to sit on a wet banana stem. The moisture slowly seeps through your clothes until you suddenly realize you are very wet. Any official who retained some vestige of humanity, on hearing this speech would be forced to reflect on their actions. As I have argued elsewhere, according to Balinese ideas about meaning, unless a statement has an effect, nothing has happened. Whether what the dalang said is commentary or not depends therefore on whether people paid attention and appreciated it, and whether it was effective.

\footnote{16}{There is an important restriction here. What I heard was mostly said by men.}
We seem to have reached a limiting possibility of commentary. Commentary cannot be singled out as a discriminable class of phenomena — indeed its efficacy in this last example is both in it not seeming to be so and being open to how different people may, or may not, choose to relate to it. Whether something is, or is not, commentary turns out to a significant degree to be situational and relational. It depends both upon the occasion, the particular circumstances and upon the relationship between the speaker and different members of the audience. How come this has not been more obvious? I would suggest it is because we have been enticed by how easy it is to take an object in isolation from the circumstances of its use. So doing ignores the extent to which we are dealing with ways of relating things (here practices), and, crucially, with the relationship between such relations. In C.S. Peirce’s terms, we are concerned not with firsts (things as they appear in themselves), but with seconds (relationships) and thirds (the relationships between relations).

Why should there be this bias towards a closure around the circumstances of production, when it is not justified by the complex and under-determined nature of the object of inquiry? (I am irresistibly reminded of the habit of dogs, when their owners point at something, of gazing at the owner’s finger, not at the object. Media are directed to something beyond themselves, to the extent that their objects are not simulacra. To the degree that they are, we are caught in Baudrillard’s world of hyper-reality, 1983.) The short and nasty answer is because it is makes life more convenient for scholars. It also maintains the cozy myth of the shared superiority of the producers and academic commentators. Matters may well be worse still. For the closure around production and its objects decentres the relationships which production presupposes. It allows the intellectual to imagine herself as universal, as able in principle to occupy all (or sufficient) of the possible positions of any member of an audience anywhere as to be able to dispense with what people in different circumstances have actually said and thought.

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17 The point about actions and practice is that they are directed. That is they are directed towards bringing about a state of affairs, which is not already, or entirely, the case. They are directed to an end outside themselves and so are contingent. The media appear to be the opposite, in that they mediate pre-existing entities. A moment’s reflection suggests though that mediation transforms what it mediates and so is a kind of practice.
Just Talk?

In other words, we encounter a strong and benighted version of European rationalism and idealism. That this makes the study of mass media and much else besides complicated, untidy, dirty - we might actually have to go out and live with people - and, probably by definition, always partly unknowable is no excuse for intellectual myopia and recidivism.\(^\text{18}\) Because we don’t have good methods of studying how media products work once they leave the safety of the producers’ world is no justification to preferring rationalizations as to why we need not worry anyway. J.K. Galbraith I believe it was who remarked that, faced with the overwhelming case for changing your mind and thinking of reasons not to, most people immediately start thinking up good reasons.

*Just when you thought it was safe to come out*

If explanatory closure around production and its objects is inadequate, is the study of reception the answer? As a comprehensive alternative, the answer is evidently ‘no’, because it commits an equal and opposite substantialization. Also reception is the subordinate term in a dichotomy of production : reception (or a trichotomy, if you include distribution). This is evident if you consider how often scholars assume use or enjoyment of media products - quite ridiculously - to be consumption.\(^\text{19}\) To do so is to mistake the part for the whole, or to reify a metaphor. Because the mass media involve business, not everything to do with the mass media is business. Or, because for expository purposes it may be helpful to imagine, say, making and appreciating television programmes as a process of production and

\(^{18}\) In many ways, the better the commentary, the less it is determined at the point of creation or production, and the more in the processes not so much of reception, but of what is done with the commentaries afterwards. The counter-argument that this makes study impossible depends on a false binary logic. If A doesn’t work, then B must be right. An intelligent version has been argued against audience studies by John Hartley. It runs that you can’t study audiences by barging into someone’s living room, because audiences are textual constructs. So we necessarily talk of an audience as something or other (1992). That merely opposes crude empiricism with an inspecific idealism. The question is: how do practices of imagining audiences as, including by audiences themselves, affect what happens? Again, that is why I stress media-related practices. It is what is consequent, what happens after. If there is a message for Asian media studies, it might be to avoid the closure around production, which has beset Euro-American assumptions about media studies. As an ethnographer, I am worried by the retreat into textualism, idealism, almost any ‘-ism’, which enables us to hierarchize ourselves relative to practice and to our interlocutors.

\(^{19}\) The opposition of mass culture and high art sneaks in here. We seem to be happy to talk about consuming television, game shows or whatever, but to say you went to the theatre to consume King Lear or the Ramayana sounds odd.

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consumption does not mean that it is, any more than because it may be illuminating to treat culture as a text, culture therefore is a text.

One reason for proposing media-related practices as the object of study is precisely to break away from the closure which results from imposing models on complex and under-determined actions. I therefore refer to such practices as a congeries, because they do not, on this account, form a system, but are situated, open-ended and continually liable to change.

Why then should production appear such an encompassing and satisfying frame of reference? It is, I think, because of a vicious circularity. Production has been represented as the core constitutive principle, institution, practice or whatever of capitalism - or at least it was until consumption emerged from the shadows (see Baudrillard 1970; Bocock 1993). By processes which many of you probably understand far better than I, with the rise of the New Right in Europe and the States, and the emergence of the Asian Tigers, production - or, perhaps better, what I would call ‘productivism’ - came to be a metaphysical principle (Collingwood 1940). That is it became a presupposition about the way the world was imagined necessarily to be and so should be judged. We know the resulting absurdities in academia only too well, as university managers attempt to quantify thought in order to measure academic ‘output’. Extrapolating and universalizing an idea, then measuring the original according to these extrapolated criteria, produces a neat fit, because the whole activity is circular. Then to judge the media, through which this extrapolation took place, by the same standards merely compounds the circularity.

Example 5: The Governor of Bali awards the prizes

In my final example, let us consider how productivism may be acted out. The example is the lead news item from a daily English-language broadcast in April 1997

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20 That is not to say that the relationship of some practices may not usefully be treated as systematic for particular purposes.
by TVRI in Bali, aimed primarily at tourists but, for fascinating reasons, with a massive Balinese following. As with many TVRI news items, a voiceover provides a commentary. The Governor of Bali is shown presiding over the annual competition to judge the best ‘Traditional Village’ (the translation of désa adat, itself a hybrid term of Dutch colonial ancestry). As with most scenes of government VIPs, the camera follows the movements of him and his entourage as he meets (less) important people against a backdrop of the well-behaved masses, who nicely exemplify Foucault’s ‘docile bodies’ (1977c).

The commentary is in factual tone and as if something important were happening. We are given a familiar tableau vivant presentation (see Appendix A). There are extensive details of places and people’s names (where the ceremony happened, which villages and actors won), that would be completely meaningless to the intended audience. So would the extended reference to one of a number of obscure categorizations (The Tri Hita Karana)\(^{22}\), which Balinese have resuscitated in order to meet the required criteria for an accepted religion under the New Order. My favourite line is the Governor expressing concern for the protection of Bali against the ravages of tourism, because according to other television news footage, in demonstrations a few years ago the university students singled out the Governor as the person primarily responsible for the damage. Commentary can square circles.

It is the final line, however, which concerns me. This sounds like a direct quote: ‘Participants who did not win this time should try to increase their development and capabilities’. This is probably not an infelicity in translation. A central plank of the New Order was development, which was to be judged in terms of production, production itself being judged mainly quantitatively and being applicable to anything. You can – indeed must - have more tradition, traditional villages and capabilities (the Indonesian was almost invariably ketrampilan, skills, Balinese being

\(^{21}\) I deliberately use the passive, because precisely who claims this is vague, exnominated, or attributed to particular author-functions (Foucault 1980). Capitalism is sufficiently vague as to cover a multitude of sins, which is the point.

\(^{22}\) The Tri Hita Karana has many definitions. Crudely it is the three elements of Divinity as all-pervasive, which make possible the emergence of good in this world. In humans these make up spirit (pahyangan) which enables humans to live; capacities in the form of energy, speech and thought (pawongan); and the body (paumahan) composed of the five gross elements of which all matter is

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identified synecdochically by their legendary traditional skills in the performing and plastic arts) and also increase development and modern skills without any contradiction. The antagonism is so obvious as to be absurd. It is ‘productivism’ gone mad. There is nothing to which it does not apply.

Production versus seduction:

One of the most vocal critics of the festishization of production is Baudrillard. He opposes production to seduction (the title of his book on the subject).

The bourgeois era dedicated itself to nature and production, things quite foreign and even expressly fatal to seduction. And since sexuality arises, as Foucault notes, from a process of production (of discourse, speech or desire), it is not surprising that seduction has been all the more covered over (1990: 1)

Seduction, in Baudrillard’s analysis, is emphatically not about sexuality: that articulation was the bourgeois means of tainting the idea of seduction, which belongs to a different world.

Seduction, however, never belongs to the order of nature, but that of artifice – never to the order of energy, but that of signs and rituals. This is why all the great systems of production and interpretation have not ceased to exclude seduction – to its good fortune – from their conceptual field (1990: 2).

Seduction is opposed to quantifiability and so to accumulation, power-as-productive and (in a sideswipe at Lacan) the real.

Seduction is stronger than power because it is reversible and mortal, while power, like value, seeks to be irreversible, cumulative and immortal... It is the emptiness behind, or at the very heart of power and production; it is this emptiness that today gives them their last glimmer of reality. Without that which reverses, annuls, and seduces them, they would never have had the authority of reality. The real, moreover, has never interested anyone. It is a place of disenchantment, a simulacrum of accumulation against death (1990: 46).

Delightfully, even our fascination with structure and systems turns out not to be what it seems.
Any system that is totally complicit in its own absorption, such that signs no longer make sense, will exercise a remarkable power of fascination. Systems fascinate by their esotericism, which preserves them from external logics. The absorption of anything real by something self-sufficient, and self-destructive, proves fascinating (1990: 77).

And nowhere is this submission to ritual more apparent in the modern world than in television, with its repetitive genres and viewing habits. But, as Makiko Taniguchi shows in her paper, it is elsewhere in the world of media, in idols and icons, that seduction reaches its peak: in the artificial perfection of the sign.

Undoubtedly the best example of this is to be found in the only important constellation of collective seduction produced by modern times, that of film stars or cinema idols (1990: 94).

Baudrillard offers a seductive account of the limits of production as the dominant order of modern bourgeois society. But quite what is seduction all about? Nowhere does Baudrillard define seduction, partly of course because definition is an antithetical process to seduction, which stands opposed to production as momentary, reversible, weak, fragile, unstable. It is potentially revolutionary, as it undermines the dominant orders of society – humour and ridicule being examples. It is ritual, agonistic, above all linked to artifice, to appearances, illusions and the joy of surfaces. Here Baudrillard echoes other writers like Foucault (1990) in being critical of the claims of interpretation as discovering truth in deep foundations and Sontag (1961) in calling for an appreciation of things as they appear, which significantly she calls an ‘erotics’.

The more you ask exactly what Baudrillard has in mind by seduction, the more confused it becomes. As the first quotation shows, ostensibly the importance seduction attains is in historical antithesis to bourgeois concerns with production. But it also seems that seduction is always there, waiting to manifest itself in different guises, depending on the nature of its adversary. So it becomes increasingly unclear whether Baudrillard is launching an attack on bourgeois values as the dominant ideology; whether this is a critique of the nature of production or power themselves as positive-sum games; whether there is an implicit theory of human nature (be this a theory of desire and its Others, of the ambivalence inherent in the human condition); whether this is a theory of pleasure and entertainment; whether this is a Nietzschean...
philosophy of suspicion to counter the positivities and positivism of humans as portrayed ideologically; or whether this is a theory of resistance to, and the refusal of, power. Seduction exists as the antithesis to production. How convenient of the world to constitute itself neatly into dichotomies, perfectly and exclusively adapted for the European – notably the Gallic – mind to grasp.

So, while I think Baudrillard is perceptive in remarking, after Foucault, just how thoroughly productivism permeates contemporary thinking, his explanation is unsatisfactory and ethnocentric. Where the argument seems to me to be useful is by pointing to the inadequacy of thinking about the media in terms of production. While selling widgets and sitcoms both presumably require knowledge of market practices, widgets and sitcoms are not the same sort of thing. Films and television programmes have to engage, involve, amuse, divert, attract, intrigue, tempt, entice, keep hooked or sway audiences and viewers in their diversity, or at least prevent them from getting bored and walking off. Widgets don’t. Substituting ‘seduction’ for ‘production’ in writings about entertainment mass media at least is a salutory exercise in breaking frame. To have to think about making films or programmes as an attempt to seduce audiences reveals quite different kinds of relationships with them. They cease to be irrelevant masses, but instead become fickle gerundive. They are there to be reached, but their response is unsure. They cannot be relied on, as many peddlers of formula entertainment have discovered to their cost.

Winding down:

To come back to my starting point, the Balinese villagers with whom I have talked about television-watching were perceptive commentators on how the mass media worked in Indonesia. They were acutely aware of the means by which they were being disarticulated. And they were by turns lyrically self-critical and detached about how, despite themselves, they could be seduced by television and advertisements (Hobart in press [b]). What ordinary people make of, and do with, mass media is

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23 A research student of mine, a Belgian film-maker, Laurent Van Lancker suggested to me that seductive practices play a still more direct role. Because distributors conventionally look at only the first six or seven minutes of a film in deciding whether to take it, directors consciously set out to entice their fellows in the trade by how they present these first crucial minutes.
proving beyond academics' imagination. We are facing the limits of reifying production (or equally distribution and reception) as objects of study. These in turn limits show up the antagonisms, which lurk behind our still heavily idealized – and Eurocentric – theories, when we consider the way the world is as a congeries of practices.

Such analyses fail to consider the mass media as practices. A stress on practice (and so relationships, because practices by definition relate agents and events) changes our object of study. Practice may be the meeting point between empirical and critical approaches because, significantly, it includes the practices of media practitioners, audiences and the researchers themselves as part of the problem. In so doing it marks a shift from the conventional hierarchy of the knower and her categories as being superior to those of the known. Ron Inden’s paper argues that Indian film-making and viewing involves presuppositions, which make little sense according to conventional analytical categories. Omitting the vast range of media and popular thinking and commentary about media from consideration quite unnecessarily closes down most of what is of interest.

Here I have considered one aspect of an approach based on practice. That is commentary. Considering that we spend much of our daily and professional lives commenting and listening to others' commentaries, it is remarkable that we have managed to overlook its importance. Commentary however does not lend itself to easy categorization. The efficacy – and seductiveness – of some of the finest commentary is that it is situational and relational. So, as Indonesian actors and puppeteers know well, it can elude the apparatuses of power and production, as we usually understand them. The puppeteers and the village commentators are discussing the nature of justice in contemporary Indonesia. The aim of this paper is to argue that commentary in media studies cannot be dismissed, however, as just talk.

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Appendix A

Original Transcriptions

Example 1: Viewers’ rights

Title: Stories behind the news: When will the rights come?

(The following is my translation from the Indonesian of the two opening paragraphs, followed by a summary of an inset specifying the viewer’s rights in question.)

After television boomed in the nineties, society has begun to be critical in its reception of some programmes, which have appeared. Many consequences have come to the surface: There have been advantages, and also for sure, losses. How far has attention really been paid to the rights of viewers? How come many people are not yet aware of them?

So long as TVRI had a monopoly, protests were almost never listened to. It was as if viewers “fatalistically” accepted whatever was offered by the oldest station, which so happened to represent the voice of the government. In fact however people were inclined to appreciate it with careful scrutiny. If nowadays this criticism applies even more forcefully to society at large, is that an indication of the awareness of their rights as viewers, as consumers?

The double spread includes an inset of what are viewers’ rights.

Three are listed. Rights as regards news stories: these shall be true, placed in their proper context, broadcast immediately after the event and without concern for ratings, in a format in keeping with the society in question. Second, the right to commercial information: this shall be in proportion, objective, honest, moral, informative and entertaining. It must not be insulting to women or lower intellectual values, tastes or ethics. Third, viewers have the right to programmes which are without bias according to religion, culture and race.

Example 2: A popular anti-corruption song

Programme Saksi (Witness). Channel: INDOSIAR 19.07.98
Title Haruskah POLRI keluar dari ABRI (Should the police force separate from the armed forces?)
Song Salam Anak Negeri (Greetings Fellow Citizens)
Written by Doel Sumbang
Sung by Ully and the Reformist Group (Ully dan Kaum Reformis)

Greetings you Ministers, don’t just get wealthy sitting in chairs.

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Stop your private business for a moment and look at the fate of the people of this country. Many have had their dignity taken away.

Greetings to you Big Bosses, think a little when you give orders, so they don't dig up the roads the whole time and the street vendors' carts aren't damaged and their capital swept away by the local authorities.

Greetings you fellow citizens, you Ministers, Big Bosses.
Remember that the country is not your private property.
Greetings you police officers, you have to be firmer when you are on duty.
Don't fool around with matters which are dirty.
Guard your self-respect if you want to be respected. Don't take bribes too often.
Greetings you judges and prosecutors, don't be ashamed to apply the law fairly and without favour.
When there is proof, you have to apply sanctions.

From the small time hoodlums to the big cases of corruption,
Why was Edy Tanzil (a crony of the President who disappeared while under investigation) allowed to get away?
Greetings you fellow countrymen, police officers, judges and prosecutors.
Remember justice is not something to be played with.
Greetings you fellow countrymen, Ministers and Big Bosses.
Remember the country is not your private property.

Example 3: Neutral Reporting as Commentary?

Source: Television Asia, March 1999 (p 8)
Article title: ANteve taken to court by foreign creditors for unpaid debt
Reporter: Karidun Pardosi

Indonesia broadcaster ANteve is facing a suit from three of its seven major foreign creditors: IBJ Asia Limited, Korea Commercial Finance and Haraneum Banking Corporation.
Sixty percent controlled by conglomerate Aburizal Bakrie, ANteve has been unable to pay more than Rp400 billion (US$50 million), including interest.
In January 1997, ANteve issued US$59.7 million worth of bonds, and seven foreign creditors had agreed to purchase bonds that will mature in 2002. To underwrite the bonds, ANteve, which started operations in March 1993, had agreed to pay a sinking fund of US$14 million on 11 February 1997. The second payment fund, worth US$3.7 million, was supposed to have been paid in June 1998, and interest amounting to US$3.2 million in August 1998. However, the second payment, and the US$3.2 million interest remain unpaid to date.
Under the country's bankruptcy law, the three creditors may expect to get their money back through the sale of ANteve's assets. "My clients will also utilise the money to be received from ANteve to pay off their debts to their creditors," says Joni Aries Bangun, a lawyer for the three foreign companies.
Mustafa I Jatim, general manager of ANteve, strongly disagrees with the creditors' move. "Though the fund has not been paid, the bonds and interest will mature in 2002. So it's too early to bring the matter to court," he says.
Jatim says the bonds should be processed through a shareholders' meeting, and not

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just by the three creditors. He is advocating for farther negotiations: "As long as ANteve remains on air, we are optimistic that we will he able to pay our debt through a roll over scheme. Bringing the case to court is not the best solution during the crisis."

Bangun argues that with Asia’s unstable financial markets, it is not easy for foreign creditors to trust Indonesian companies these days. Analysts, however, are quite skeptical about the country's bankruptcy law. So far, no creditor has succeeded in filing a bankruptcy petition against its debtors at the commercial court. According to the analysts, the best alternative is to convert bonds into shares. However, regulatory restrictions on foreign investors, with the exception of capital markets, is prohibiting the transition.

SCTV, which is controlled by four local businessmen (Peter Gontha, Bambang Trihatmojo, Henry Pribadi, and Sudwakatmono), owes up to Rp 89.5 billion (US$11.18 million) to state bank Bank Bumi Daya, and an additional US$20 million in offshore loans, which have been converted into onshore loans by the bank. On top of that, SCTV still owes Rp 34 billion (US$4.25 million) to state run station TVRI. Reportedly, the government has plans to take over SCTV, and the bank will be retaining consultants for the job. However, both moves have been rejected by SCTV.

Indonesia’s television stations have been to pay their liabilities despite the growing strength of the rupiah against the dollar this year. Advertising revenue fell by 60 per cent last year, though a 20 to 30 percent improvement is forecasted for 1999.

Example 4: Pandawa Asrama

Source: TVRI Denpasar broadcast, weekly between 01.07.91 and 15.07.91
Troupe: Sendratari SMKI Denpasar
Title: Pandawa Asrama.
Dalang: Dewa Made Sayang.

Bagawan Biasa: If you are the leader of a people - rule over them – you cannot, for instance live too well. You must not have too luxurious a life-style, but should live simply. You are such a leader. Now none of your subjects should be allowed to be corrupt – that is what you should order. But it must be carried out seriously in practice. It should not just be words: you order the masses to obey, but then it turns out you didn’t do so yourself. That is the difficulty of becoming a ruler. It is easy to give orders, it is hard to put them into practice. That is the first thing to grasp. When there is a ruler who is not honest, the world goes to rot. No way may you do that. This is being just. You have to strive to be fair and just to all of your subjects. On what do you base fairness? On the Four Kinds of Circumspection: Even-handedness (Sama), Discrimination (Beda), Generosity (Dana) and Strictness (Danda). Even-handedness: you should give to your subjects equally. The Kingdom of Indraprasta flourishes - who is responsible? All the subjects, all the officials, are the reason. All the armed forces are the reason. Because the ruler treated them all equally. If perhaps they struggle to make a living, give them more – that’s called Sama.

(The speaker then turns to the arts and urges the good leader not to favour one group of artists at the expense of another. Otherwise the others will be angry, gossip will stand and the ruler will be discredited. The dalang was a senior figure for KOKAR, © Mark Hobart 1999
one of the two leading academies for performing arts in Bali. However, because of
the very close relationship between the then-Governor of Bali, Ida Bagus Oka, and the
head of the other academy, STSI, all invitations to travel overseas on government-
sponsored cultural tours invariably went to STSI. KOKAR was never sent, despite
the agreed quality of its performances.)

Discrimination: it is also right to differentiate between your subjects. Those who
work better should be given more. Generosity: it is proper that you give generously to
your people, without expectation of return. Strictness: if a subject does wrong, (s)he
should be subject to the law. You cannot ignore evil-doing, even if it is a member of
your own family. This is the justice which I urge on you.

Example 5: The Governor of Bali presents the prizes:

Source: TVRI Denpasar
Title: Balivision (English language programme) April 1997
Item: Lead story

Set against shots of the Governor presiding and meeting people to a background of
suitably docile, patient and orderly crowds.

Yesterday Bali Governor Ida Bagus Oka presented an award to the winner of the
Traditional Bali Competition for 1996-1997 at Wantilan Taman Ayun, Badung. First
place went to the Mengwi Traditional Village, sub-district of Mengwi, Badung
Regency. They received an award and cash totalling Rp. 4,500,000. In second place
was Tegallinggah Traditional Village at Bedaulu, Gianyar and third place was taken
by Betanja (?), sub-district of South Denpasar.

The Wayang-Arja Parade Competition was also held. First place went to I Nyman
Sudana, a puppeteer from Badung Regency; second to I Wayan Karsa from Bangli;
and third place to Dèwa Putu Banjar from Gianyar Regency. The Governor said that
we have to protect the negative impact of tourism by maintaining our customs through
Traditional Villages and the Tri Hita Karana concepts, which include pahyangan,
pawongan and paumahan. He added that participants who did not win this time
should try to increase their development and capabilities.
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