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Satellite Television and New Subjectivities: assessing the content and contexts of media consumption

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ABSTRACT

Satellite Television and New Subjectivities: assessing the content and contexts of media consumption

This paper is based on qualitative research on Satellite Television consumption executed in Indonesia. It combines a detailed analysis of television viewing with a theoretical proposition related to the use of media in postmodern Asia. It argues that engagement with satellite television in the Indonesian context reveals a postmodern pluralist view of television content.

This research is based on the need to understand how members of an audience group re-configured television texts for their use within their own "interpretative communities". Understanding how audiences watch television - both foreign and local, knowing what programs and channels are preferred, understanding the positions on foreign programming of domestic events all contribute strongly to complicating the picture of current use of global television.

Mostly by accident Indonesia is almost in the unique position of having a historically strong media history in the construction of its national identity programs which have inadvertently become the vehicle for a fractioning of this national ideology. The television sphere - local and global does provoke or reiterate national crises as do other media. It also is a site where audiences adopt a reflective relationship re-configuring the material for pleasure, knowledge and understanding.

No account of subjectivities can take place in abstraction from empirical situations of media consumption and production. These empirical studies are a means of providing temporary moorings upon which analysis of the mediascape including the activity of its interpretative communities. The framing of this activity rests on a theorisation of two encircling boundaries: national identity and cultural pluralism. The question of national identity emerges from its location within ideologies of nation-building and development to confront the fundamental problems of active citizenship in postcolonial societies. It has a contradictory legacy to negotiate: nation building as an anti-colonial affirmation of sovereignty in the push to join the "family of independent nations" on the one hand; attraction and resistance because of the links of globalisation to corporate domination especially American cultural domination.

These issues are played out differently in separate national formations, and are part of the terms of what can be articulated as the difference between cultural citizenship or cultural impoverishment. Surrounding these poles are political
controversies played out against the global economic and information disorder in which national response is monitored at every juncture for its acknowledgment of global pressures and constraints. The "new subjectivities" in the contemporary ASEAN context is one in which lived phenomena of financial crisis dominates. The "new subjectivities" put into crisis the national identity ideologies that would insist on the inseparability between an economic power - eg, corporate global media and the cultural/symbolic capital which accompanies it eg Los Angeles Style television. A crisis emerges because no particular concern can be forced onto consumers in the course of their consumptive practices of global media. There are local spinoffs which advantage local industry through any number of subcultural forms which participate in these global media events and trends. National identity may not be so much weakened by global media as shown to be irrelevant to ongoing cultural pluralism which is the sine qua non of contemporary media practice.

Indonesian audiences are watching television in which image-dominant programs (eg MTV) and narrative-dominant programs (eg soaps) form the basis for style-behaviours and taste-cultures. Political content on television is also having an important effect on perceptions of leadership and governance. The consequence is that rather than embrace discourses based on essentialist ideas of identity (eg cultural nationalism) to assess the impact of broadcast television, analysis is needed of the new subjectivities which have been created through exposure to a pluralist postmodern culture in which broadcast television is one of several technological features of a contemporary mediasphere.

It is therefore a direct challenge to the populists and nationalists to forge a cultural and media analysis that premises communication sovereignty on cultural values of citizenship rather than rhetorical regrets concerning dependency.
Satellite Television and New Subjectivities: assessing the content and contexts of media consumption

1. Introduction: The significance of satellites in the Asian context

In 1976 Indonesia decided to launch its own domestic satellite service, Palapa 1, to provide a language program designed to distribute Indonesian as the national language to an ethnically and linguistically diverse nation. The innovation was expected to relieve the Indonesian state of introducing an expensive terrestrial television system designed to achieve the same ends. The Indonesians grasped the spatially-binding capacities of satellite television more quickly than other nations. This is because Indonesia, from its inception, has been preoccupied with achieving a unified political state. This moment can be interpreted as both a bureaucratic decision founded on technocratic and rational grounds and as a grand nationalist vision to create a singular and unified nation out of diversity. In retrospect, neither the bureaucratic decision nor the nationalist vision saw beyond the immediate desire to secure the nation. The unforeseen consequences of creating a radically new Indonesian mediascape, such as the spill over of information, data and messages from foreign communicative sources and the exposure to Indonesian audiences of the emergent global media industry initially escaped the attention of the Indonesian authorities. By seeking to create a singular state using new communication technologies the Indonesian authorities ignored the potential of the technology to create new heterogeneities and subjectivities and the resulting interaction of the local with the global. Though these contradictions are specific to the context of Indonesia's media history, they foreshadow subsequent problems of satellite communication throughout Asia. Foremost among these problems, faced
in recent times by all Asian nation-states, are media policy formation - a critical intervention in the desire by governments to control mass media consumption within cultural formation. At stake is the issue of communication sovereignty - a concept increasingly vital to postcolonial political formations confronted by the constraints of global capitalism.

Satellites were introduced initially as a state initiative in the policy frameworks of development communication designed to introduce a modernising economic and social agenda. Indeed entertainment was not perceived to be a legitimate function of television for these social engineering purposes. As such they were introduced for essentially domestic broadcast reasons but they opened up the potential for global broadcasting to become available to mass consumption throughout Asia, a fact not lost on international advertising corporations. The interplay between the local, national and the global in the television arena represents a set of problems and practices around the issue of national sovereignty that are paradigmatically displaced onto communication and information. These issues and problems are, then, most acute in the attempts to consolidate communication sovereignty.

2. The theory of “new subjectivities”

I would like to begin with an email message I received from an acquaintance in Surabaya at the height of the current crisis in Indonesia. This message is not extraordinary in the story it tells nor does it suggest a heroic stance in comparison to the lives lost in the fight for democracy - but only in the testimony it gives - in its struggle to communicate a desire to re-negotiate the terms of social participation and agency in a changing and uncertain world. It is clear the current situation poses great threats to individuals but as well affords a rare opportunity to author one’s
political identification as citizen and subject. I reproduce the following message with no modification in language or expression:

Hart, I’m sorry that I didn’t send you e-mail on long-long time...:

You Know that since November 1997 I to be social Worker at SAVY AMIRA, Surabaya Women’s Crisis Center, that is one of Non Goverment Organization (NGO) at Surabaya, and in the other hand I’m still teaching in my university and to do some research project.

And in this situation (crowded situation in my country:()), I’m joint at Komite Perempuan Pro Demokrasi (KPPD), Surabaya [Surabaya Women’s Pro Democracy Commite], this is a new organization that found by NGO, Society Organization, women’s labour, career women, Student, and house wives too. We have the same Idea to concern for our country, and we have the first meeting on March’98, and on April, 21 ’98, we had first ‘demonstration’ at Airlangga University.

Now, on weekly we have program to discussion about this situation, especially discus, thinking and try to found problem solving about women’s problem in this situation.

We have very bad economic condition, and women/house wives often feel ‘stress’ with this problem.

Some times I joint with student to demonstration too, maybe you read at Airlangga University almost all of lecturer, and profesor had joint with their student too, they give their students’s a spirit.

That’s great, and we didn’t know how ‘must we do’ except to do demonstration. Demonstration is instruments for us to ‘warning’ our
government, because you know that our parliament is didn’t "healthy"
again...:(, out last election wasn’t fair, too much falseness....
it’s too nepotism at our parliament and our government :(.
It’s too much Corruption and solution and our government. So we must
‘warning’ them.

Dear Hart, in this moment, sometimes I must forgeted my ‘need’ personal,
I thinking that I have to so something for my people.....
Yeah..., maybe it’s hear too idealism, but I hope I could still help my
people, especially for ‘poor people’ in my country.
wish me luck.....:)

The message speaks for itself in the way it announces a form of participation in the
current crisis - a way of creating agency for oneself when there is no longer any
“choice” in the sense that one must act in concert and individually to effect change.
However it raises issues which need to be explained within a separate vocabulary in
which a “new subjectivity” can be said to be forged out of a constellation of contexts
and pressures currently featured within contemporary societies.
The assertion that new communications technology has created new
heterogeneities and subjectivities is best grounded in a theory of the subject in
modernity and postmodernity. The question of ‘new subjectivities”: is best
interpreted as a practice of a politics of identity. In this regard the political
dimension to social life is privileged over the economic and ideological
dimensions because the subjectivist elements in identity construction are driven
by a quest for the realisation of democratic social values. The politics of identity,
however, raise both individual and collectivist questions about this process. This
means that complex accounts of the relationship between individual choice and
desire must be contextualised within larger frames involving ideas of community and lifestyle in a media-driven consumer culture. Two conceptual tools aid substantially in the development of these accounts: the postmodern and the postcolonial. Though specific in the manner this concepts frame the issues of identity, they both innovate models or ideas on the historical moment of modernity. In the context of postmodernism, identity choice moves further than just reflexively balancing a plurality of social roles. It can involve a conscious experimentation with identity in which identity choice is a highly directed activity (see Lash & Friedman: 1992). In the context of postcolonialism, these identity choices entail great risks. Perhaps one manner of differentiating postmodernism from postcolonialism is the degree to which a postcolonial identity and related practices may involve risks that could extend to imprisonment or even death.

For example, in the contemporary context of "crisis" in Indonesia, the intersection of media, political resistance and social fragmentation illustrates graphically both the risks and opportunities afforded by the consequences of "postmodern innovation". It would appear that the postmodern media-techno sphere through satellite and other innovations both initiate and enhance a "liminal" zone - a kind of "in-between space" within which subjectivities - both individual and collective - can temporarily form. When the patterns of social and political activity are mobilised, this liminality may be extended to challenge the boundaries of authority and resistance. It is without doubt that the definition of this liminality is a specifically spatial one in the current Indonesian case. For example, Indonesian students initiated the challenge to regulatory authorities first on their campuses - a carefully designated liminal space - part of the fabric of the socio-political context but not fully of the social space represented by the street. When the students move off their campuses onto the streets, the liminal is radically extended. The non-
student “riots” and “looting” which followed the killing of students by the armed forces extended the challenge to authority. This was both continuous and discontinuous with the space of liminality established. With the entry of the army (ABRI), the forces of rationalisation and authority over the Jakarta streetscapes establishes a counter liminal definition of spatial control. The media also extends a parallel liminal space in the mediasphere. Subject to similar forces of authority and rationalisation, this space is also modified in relation to the policing of the airwaves in the battle between the resistant and the conservatives in the current context.

(Before extending this analysis I would like to introduce a long “bracket” in which it should be incumbent on me to specify how this current crisis differs in kind from the events of ‘65 which brought Suharto to full control. In theory, given the massive changes in mediaspheres and technospheres and the expansion of transnational media, should not the pattern and means of political change be radically different? Yet we can recall the dominant images of the time (1965) in which the streets were also the battle zones for control over the hearts and minds of the Indonesian people, where the streets were also the point of contact between the controlling forces of the army and the establishment of the new regime. Indeed one could argue that the differences in historical terms are not that great, though we are at the beginning of the current crisis in terms of how the issue of ultimate political authority will be resolved.

I would argue however that the existence of the Internet and satellite television to name two substantial new media technologies have displaced an ideologically-based and ideologically-led conflict characteristic of the ‘65 crisis. Today, the opposition is united in its desire to end the regime of the current supreme
authority in the country. In other words, the transnational media mobilises a post-
nationalist politics - though not (contradictorily) devoid of the rhetoric of
nationalist ideological content (hence my email correspondent's continuing
articulation of "doing something for my country"). This is, however, no longer
characteristic of the anti-colonial, third worldist discourse characteristic of the
struggle between Sukarnoist and Suhartoist forces across the cold war divide of
Marxist and anti-Marxist political values of the sixties.

In postcolonial and post-communist world systems, the targets are more immediate
and with the speed of global economic explosions, the consequences of the reversal
of economic fortune are extremely swift. The consequences: the mainstreaming of
a rebellion already in waiting - lubricated by the now more certain perceptions - of,
as my correspondent puts it, government corruption, collusion and nepotism.

3. Modern versus Postmodern media communities

The idea of a media community has its roots in two sometimes opposed definitions
of community: the first suggests a direct common concern between people - the
second suggests the organisations that would hold and express those concerns. A
media community embodies both sides of this definition. It can be seen as a
grouping of a large number of persons - a community of those who have nothing
in common (Lingis, 1994). This would include a range of negotiated, perceived and
worked upon meanings that flow and shift within the media's reception
environments. The media community may also accent concerted formations,
organisations and action as in fan groupings, lobbying associations and a range of
formally organised activities in local and national politics.
Though the terms community and communication are linked etymologically, the deep structure of the relationship is emphasised first in the work of John Dewey, American pragmatist philosopher in the early part of this century. Dewey and those who followed his thought produced an idealisation of community connected to the process of communication. The themes of this idealisation and its relationship to communication were 1) the pursuit of democracy 2) the communalising force of communications 3) the impact of technology on social life. For Dewey, community was a foundational concept - a first principle on which the understanding of communication as a process could be founded. In his seminal work, The Public and Its Problems (1927), Dewey theorised communication as both the problem and the solution to dealing with the erosion of democracy and the potential for its revival in America. Dewey's idea (and idealisation) of community was a projection of what conceptually could stand for the collective and creative will of groups of people....to re-establish the domain of the public and the life of the community.

I refer at length to Dewey’s projection of a ideal media community because it represents the founding of a liberal-democratic nexus for the understanding of media’s power within modernity. The recovery of the media as a force for democracy and cultural power can be traced to the enlightenment values of Dewey’s project even if, as Rorty claims, Dewey exchanged “enlightenment rationalism for enlightenment liberalism” (Rorty, 1989).

The point however, is to further the critical work by Dewey and others by suggesting how it fails to encompass elements of media work and media community in a post-mass media world, in the world of postmodernity. The ground for this analysis is the general condition of the globalisation of media and
the local context of the Indonesian mediascape (ownership, policy and consumption) in relation to which this globalisation has occurred.

Of the many unanswered questions regrading these issues, I can identify what I will not be addressing: general changes in market production and consumption, local market strategies and government policy and regulation in the media. These are all important areas of research and deserve to be addressed.

Instead I wish to offer a contextualisation of some issues arising from empirical research on media consumption and link some of these responses to the current “crisis” in Indonesia and by implication in the region as a whole. I will provide a theoretical view of a postmodern media community which moves beyond Dewey’s projection - what has been referred to as the “unworked community” - a concept of community more suited to the general conditions of postmodernity and postcolonialism and specifically to the Indonesian communities prevalent in the Indonesian “crisis”.

4. Qualitative analysis of media reportage of political events and the impact of socio-economic crisis on the media

This current crisis is also a good opportunity to empirically and analytically both test earlier accounts of media content and influence and project on the impact of “crisis” on the media - both local and transnational.

In a paper entitled Local Cultural Industry in the Global Age, Georgette Wang asserts that:
"The core concern [of media analysis] therefore, remains to be the possible acculturation effects of foreign programs, just as what media imperialism theory suggested two decades ago..." (Wang, n.d.)

She goes on to suggest that the evidence for this acculturation effect is not empirically verifiable - but that the influence of transnational media, whatever the dynamics of local cultural identity, needs to be examined carefully.

In studies executed last year in Surabaya and Medan, some sense of these dynamics can be interpreted.

On the question of news reportage from foreign and local sources, two main concerns were discussed: (1) The feelings about foreign coverage on Indonesia and (2) The relative values of local versus foreign reporting.

Foreign Views of Indonesia

The highest value reported by these discussions relates to the perception that foreign reporting is not censored. This does not translate into complete trust or belief in foreign reporting about Indonesia but creates an basis for comparison with local reporting. The attributes of accuracy, factuality and immediacy were also high on the list. The negative judgements on foreign reporting centred on the perception that they discredited Indonesia. This view, however, was seen as acceptable by some if the reasons for the unfavourable reports were seen to be based on truth or fact. CNN was mentioned most often by name in these discussions.

Local news versus foreign news

Language appeared to be the strongest barrier against foreign news consumption. The strong interest in foreign news relates to the values of a perceived lack of
censorship in relation to the constraints placed on local news. Some indicated a preference for both local and foreign news to maximise choice for the best informed decisions on news events. Some preferred more in-depth programs on current affairs finding the news too brief and superficial.

The strong representation for the view that "uncensored" and foreign reporting are synonymous suggests an important niche for foreign news reporting in Indonesia. Whether by accident or design, the current policy of the Indonesian government is to allow foreign television networks news programs without censorship. This may not be a permanent state of affairs. By the same token, the focus groups indicated a substantial scepticism of foreign news reporting and some expressed a sense of offence in the way some aspects of the country were presented. CNN is mentioned most frequently but ATV and RA are also prominent in these discussions. There is little question that the discussants valued the foreign news and the attention paid to Indonesia and that especially in times of crisis, the foreign news is a key and generally trusted source of information.

The implications for the current crisis are crucial given the pressure brought to bear on the local media by the economic crisis and the subsequent crackdown on reporting of the crisis with the return of Suharto from Cairo.

Benefits of Satellite TV

The pattern in the responses relating to the benefits of satellite television is dominated by the feeling that it offers greater choice and is a genuine alternative to local media. The clear indicator of news and information services is the strongest representation in the sort of alternative services appreciated by the respondents. There was considerable discussion on the merits of "uncensored" access to
television though this was divided equally between political and sexual censorship. Discussion of program interests were dominated by news though knowledge and educational programs were high in priority of favoured programs particularly programs relating to science and nature. If music and entertainment programs are combined, however, they are equal in popularity to educational programs.

(A note of caution here: As found with our earlier study, respondents tended to state a preference for news/educational programs when asked, but actually watched music and entertainment programs in greater frequency.)

Analysis by focus group

The focus groups were organised into 3 mixed groups - two of which were over 21 and one with those under 21 years of age. Two other groups - one all male and one all female were also included. The mixed groups over 21 years showed a fairly even spread of interests in the stated benefits of satellite television. In one group the interest in alternative news services is strong reflecting an expected interest by older viewers in current affairs. In the mixed group of under-21's there was a surprisingly strong representation in alternative information and almost no stated interest in music and entertainment.

The leading role played by students in the current crisis corroborates the interest shown by young persons, both male and female, in alternative news sources. It suggests that the movement against the current regime may have been accelerated by the global news and information services available to young and old but galvanising youth and student protest and the resulting political crisis.
The All Female group also showed an interest in alternative news services but also reported the only "non-interested" viewers - those who for reasons of culture or language did not engage with the medium in a significant way. The All Male group showed strong inclinations towards alternative interests expressed most openly by a preference for sexually explicit materials not normally available on local media.

5. The “unworked community”: the desire for community as the unmaking of community

The underlying principles guiding this theory of community is a dilemma which echoes an earlier account of the definition of community. The difference between a theoretical inquiry into the constitution of communities and community as an embodiment of the political practices associated with power and social control. The idea of the “unworked community” is drawn from a series of philosophical incursions in the constitution of community. The term is defined best as a form of constitution which arises from the undoing of institutions - social, economic, technical (Nancy: 1991). In other words an imposed or forced community once undone allows the realisation and possibility of a community incarnate.

It is within this notion of an “unworked community” - a community, which out of particular conditions, constitutes a “togetherness” which is both essential and constitutive of both individual and collective subjecthood. It is within this concept that I would place squarely the media communities within which many Indonesians place themselves - on the edge of survival and resistance. In the dismantling of the regime, the liminal zone is the site of the transitional subjectivities which inhabit it.
The “content” of media therefore becomes part of this process through its own contested sphere which feature forms of resistance, interruption and a shattering of the mythical foundations to the dominant narratives of the old regime. The primacy of the political overdetermines this content - which had already been prefaced by the economic imperatives of the moment. The media offer choices though not within the liberal social models associated with Dewey and modernity enunciated earlier. In postmodernity, choice according to Laclau, is radically contingent - the postmodern moment permits a plurality of public spaces - autonomous and democratic in anticipation of counter-hegemonic formations of community.

5. The Impact of the Economic Crisis on the Media

If I may reverse the media-society determination thesis briefly, it is instructive to give an account of the impact the economic crisis has had on media production and consumption in Indonesia and the relationship to the ensuing role of the media in the political and social dimensions of the crisis.

In Samir Amin’s terms, we have entered a post Fordist (and with respect to Indonesia specifically a “post-Bandung”) era of capitalist globalisation (Amin: 1997). The chief feature of this new economic era is a technological revolution whose consequences are mixed. Amir argues that in the transition from a Fordist world economy, certain workforces become redundant - particularly ones associated with union association and social democracy politics. The re-skilling of the workforce is led by middle class workers but without a politically motivated base - hence the decline in union participation rates and political leverages which went with it. The results see traditional left constituencies moving to the right.
The movement of capital according to Amir is also affected with more capital available through the greater productivity afforded by the new technologies. This has historically always been the case with major technological shifts with the result of overproduction.

Enter financial globalisation with the result as evidenced by the current crisis in Asia:

..the rapid mass transfer of capital from the peripheries to the centre (debt is one means of effecting this transfer)... (Amir:97). As Amir notes quoting from Sweezy and Magdoff (1966), the consequence is a “headlong rush into speculation...”

In the absence of national policies which can affect the global financial system, it is left to agencies like the IMF to clumsily prescribe the solutions. They effectively replace national policy not to mention the social and political wills and thoughts of a nation’s leaders and their followers. This is the requirement of the new Capitalism and nowhere more is the poverty of its solutions more apparent than in the role the IMF has played in Indonesia. Amir notes that this new demand can only lead to chaos, the degeneration of democratic political systems - a dangerous chaos. Amir concludes with the assertion that the "national" factor" may prevail once more, though his perspective is very much oriented towards Europe and the wealthy nations.

The crisis and the media

The Indonesian example demands some considerable re-modelling of Amir’s thesis. This is born out to some extent by the impact of the crisis on the media. With currency devaluations around 400% and the mass media dependent on foreign materials, advertising has declined by 50%. Programming has relied on
reruns to fill gaps. Coverage is minimised as newspapers cut costs with many closing down. Pages are reduced, contributions from columnists and readers cut back. Media companies even desire that their subscription lists be cut back because of failing to meet their usual demand.

The effect of globalisation on media production will never be greater than in this situation. But the role of media in the current crisis has never been more critical - more important. And until the intervention of the government upon Suharto’s return, the media had played a key role in relaying news of the street demonstrations to its constituency. Consistent with the earlier media analysis, the subjective features of local media consumption appear to maintain a viable relationship to information despite or because of the effects of globalisation.

The effects of Global Capitalism predicted by Amir appear to be correct for the Indonesian situation. The major adjustment in his analysis is with respect to two issues: first, the economic history in which the Fordist economy co-exists with a post-Fordist one....in which the illusion of a post-Fordist world can be propagated when in fact, the reality of Indonesia is that of a developing nation with mostly Fordist economic features. The so-called leap over the industrial development stage into the information stage was a far too simplistic projection of the early 90’s. Second, this illusion was built on very shaky political foundations - anti-democratic and authoritarian - only now does the Asian values debate appear as impoverished as many claimed it was...ironically the chaos which Amir predicts accompanies these latest contradictory demands of Capitalism, may, go to some lengths to have played a role in re-constructing a democratic impulse if not setting a very different course for Indonesia as a whole.
Reinventing The Newspaper
In The Digital Age

Mammen Mathew
Yoshiyuki Watanabe