The Television Viewer and the Television News: A Combative Encounter?

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Abstract

Few television (hereafter TV) news studies have focused on the moment of viewing from the perspective of the viewer – the moment of the encounter between the television viewer and the television news. The aim of this research was to investigate what takes place at that moment. Its research questions were: What viewer typology constructs at the encounter? What key TV news aesthetics emerge? What is the nature of the encounter process? The research was guided by a critical theory perspective and was carried out in Kenya using a qualitative approach with Fifty Eight respondents. The study had three key findings – that the TV viewer is a disturbed, reflective, and dominating person at the moment of encounter with in- coming news; that an epic news genre dominates the encounter; and lastly, that the key process at the encounter is one of intertextuality through a combative as well as a combustive fusion and filter procedure. The study concludes that this is a significant investigation offering a fresh perspective of looking at communication of television news. It has potential for further development around viewer and television news encounter studies.

Keywords: Television viewership, Television viewer typology, Television news aesthetics, Television – viewer encounter.

1. Introduction

The television has been researched for a period of over seventy five years. It is still a novel medium of mass communication that reaches the resting places of families and individual viewers and is also flashed to television sets in public places across each country. It is still a technological marvel so many years after its invention. In Kenya, news is one of its most widely viewed programmes. This is a study of the moment of encounter between the television viewer and the in-coming television news. The research developed three questions as follows: What viewer typology constructs at the encounter? What key television news aesthetics emerge? What is the nature of the encounter process? The research expected that the three were interrelated, each focusing on a key player at the communication encounter.

In terms of scope, the conceptualization of the television news viewer focused on four viewer aspects as follows: would the viewer be active or passive? Would he or she have preoccupations which were present at the encounter? Would the viewer have a pre-viewing motive to want to covet the news? Could it be that there is an already existing orientation in viewer on issues evoked by each news account? The research hoped that these four dimensions would help create understanding on the kind of viewer who came to the encounter and then one who constructed at the communication space. The rationale for this study stemmed from the premise that a comprehensive detailing of the communication which takes place between the viewer and the in-coming news provides fresh and plasma material for interpretation that enables a new way of looking at television news.

2. Literature Review

Literature was reviewed on several aspects of television viewership. Three main concepts emerged from the review. The first was in terms of the degree of engaging the incoming news to construct meaning. This in could in turn be experienced at the intellectual level and the emotional level. Allen (1987) argues that there are three types of relationships between the reader and text consisting of collaboration, a surrender, and resistance (Allen R. 1987, p 77). The author contends that the television viewer reads into the incoming news and constructs meaning out of each account.

A second aspect of viewer activeness is argued by Baranand Davis(2006) who point out that "an active audience exists and selects what to interact with from initial senders of information" (Baran and Davis 2006, p 269). The third aspect of viewer activeness is in the intensity of viewing along the light and heavy viewers in cultivation theory (Baran S, and Davis D. 2006, p 334). A major issue emerging from the literature is the question of the possible viewer preoccupations. Behr and Lyenger (2005) reflected on media and audience needs and stated that "although the public often responded to media agendas, the media rarely responded to the public's stated political concerns or priorities" (Stuart A. 2005, p 101). Are there viewer concerns, priorities, preoccupations which are ignored or satisfied through the text of the incoming news?

The current research conceptualized three kinds of preoccupations arguing that these could be important in viewership. These were the preoccupation of *income*, of *change* in the national situation, and the preoccupation on *self-identity* (who am I?). The research assumed that the three would be inter-linked. Mayers (2005) writes of Jean Sartre, the French philosopher and his statement that "our situations form us and decide our possibilities" (Mayers D. 2005, p 4). The research anticipated that there would be a desire in the viewer to monitor and wish changes in the situation which would in turn affect the income situation, the national situation, and the self-identity situation. Fiedler (1972) conceptualized a national self-identity in this manner: "but to be an American (unlike being a British or French) is precisely to imagine a destiny rather than to inherit it" (Waugh P. 1992, p 39). The news accounts that come to the viewer have an inner voice which defines the national situation. In turn, this communicates a definition of viewer national identity.

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

The definition of the national situation enables the viewer to assess whether there is forward movement or not in regard to national situation. The encounter is an important site for this kind of communication coveted by viewer. That is, the country is at a moment of social excitement regarding change and the viewer is seeking to be part of this encounter? On the other hand, the viewer may be looking for information relating to his or her social and personal self-identity and their different aspects. The question this raises is: Are viewer preoccupations a motive for viewing at the encounter and does it influence the way the encounter finally constructs? The examination of such a motive and any other which could be significant was explored in the research.

The next issue that emerges from the literature on TV viewership, relating to the preoccupations is whether the viewer has a pre-existing orientation of meaning as she or he engaged incoming news. This would be expected to influence the nature of engagement at the encounter if it were true. Harold Lasswellin Davis and Baran (2005) argue that such an orientation exists and for him, the media plays an important role in creating it. The writers note that "over time the audience is conditioned to possess ideas and images that are strong and emotive in an individual and which quickly responds to relevant stimuli" (Baran and Davis 2006, p 83). Lasswell describes these as master symbols and the research considered that these become active along other aspects brought out by other scholars including the priming theory as elaborated by Berkowitz (1940) and script theory as noted by Huessman (1986) (MacQuail D. 2005, p 483).

The current research was keen that the presence or absence of such a master symbol phenomenon be examined as well as its influence if any. Meanwhile, another view of such an orientation constructs from the surveillance theory. Dominick (2005) conceptualized of "a warning surveillance and instrumental surveillance" (Dominick J. 2005, p 33). He is writing in the context of function and implied content. The research in turn argues that the viewer simultaneously adopts this behaviour at the encounter of any stimuli. If this is the case, there must be a resource that gives impetus to surveillance and the study adopts this concept of master symbol as being appropriate for the purpose.

Some literature on TV viewership further depicts the incoming news as the text that the viewer interacts with. The research conceptualized this as a *hypertext* expecting to have different layers and dimensions of meaning as it comes to the viewer and to further construct into a new hypertext produced by the engagement with the viewer. This is the hypertext which emerges at the conscious engagement by the viewer. The research adopts the concept of the hypertext from Hillard (2008) who uses the word to discuss the internet text.

He mainly refers to the extended physical nature of the internet text both in terms of its links and multi-media character (Hillard 2008, p 69). The TV text however has also been considered in literature as having *multiple layers of meaning* and the term *polysemic* has been used. The physical elements are considered as well as the multiple and simultaneous ability to evoke meaning. In addition, the hyper part of the word fits in well with the emotive nature of TV news. This highly emotive in coming news encounters a viewer with an orientation that has a dimension of assessment, conviction and therefore has also a compliment of emotions attached to it. Theclash, surrender or collaborative encounter constructs a hyper emotion. This forms another dimension of the hypertext. But the research moves in another direction as it considers the physical elements of the hypertext, particularly the links. It proposes that in the case of the television news, the viewer links the text to other past texts. No news account is considered fully on its own. Past texts on the matter are close by in the sub-conscious and they come to the fore to link with the inner meaning of the news account. The research theorizes that there are continuous dramatic stories especially in the national and societal realities which have taken the form of the epic.

Related to this is the montage nature of individual news accounts. In a physical way, this is how images of TV news appear in every bulletin. They are "short bursts of reality, un-connected, eruptive, highly emotive, and critical of status quo" (Cook and Bernink 1999, p 319). When Sergei Eisenstein popularized the concept of the montage, he was constructing a genre of radical change and transformation. The research argues that the TV news in Kenya seems to have a blending of these opposite genres of the montage and the epic.

Postman (2001) raises a question of the *usefulness* of the television news text which is a key purpose of the current research. He says it is important to ask these two questions of television: What kinds of conversations does it permit? What intellectual tendencies does it encourage? Each of these is considered significant in the research and was explored in the interviews and later picked up in the discussion.

Finally, the research considers the encounter process. This ties the two ends of the communication together and is at the heart of the study. It in turn constructs both the viewer and the hypertext in a new light. The research adopts the concept of the encounter from George Simmel, one of the fathers of sociology who argued that even the most casual interaction of people is deep with signs of how their society is structured. For him the "fleeting encounters" in the streets, and the store or anywhere else are pregnant with cues of essences of that society (Collins R. and Makowsky M. 1998, p 161). The concept of fleeting encounters is appropriate as one considers the moment of viewer and news engagement. For each news item, it is indeed a fleeting moment. The term encounter provides resources for different questions about this virtual meeting. The encounter can be a casual meeting as envisaged by Simmel. It can also be a communication site and event that is sudden and unexpected, on the other hand it may be a military combative clash. Each definition of the encounter highlights unique features of viewer, the news' aesthetic that constructs, and the encounter process itself. Lastly, the encounter site while at the physical living room of the viewer moves quickly to the inner private site of consciousness – the place of recognition, assessment, and naming. In order to access this site, the research needed a methodology that would access its live activities, as highlighted in the next subsection.

3. Research Methodology

The research took a qualitative approach and integrated methodological principles from four methodological areas of hermeneutics, phenomenology, semiotics and discourse analysis. The key data generation technique was the diary which was complimented by face to face interviews as well as focus group discussions. Fifty eight participants took part with Thirty of them being involved in the diary phase and Twenty Eight in the interviews. Purposive sampling was done along the research concept of preoccupation and national change which were broken down into categories of differing income occupations, social change workers and political activists from five sites in the counties of Nairobi, Kiambu, Machakos, and Kajiado. Nairobi provided two sites. In the diary phase, participants were to fill in the diary for seven evenings. After two weeks, the face to face interviews were then carried out with each of the participants. Meanwhile, the data was analysed through a thematic interpretation process.

4. Findings

Summaries of the key findings (owing to the space constraints of this paper) are presented under the three research questions posed in the research; which were: What viewer typology constructs at the encounter? What key TV news aesthetics emerge? What is the nature of the encounter process?

4.1 Viewer Typology constructs at the encounter (Viewer portrait)

This is presented in three ways as viewer *behavior*, viewer *motives*, and viewer *affinity* to television news genres. Viewer *behavior* constructs in five dimensions as follows**,** active viewer, viewer's emotional disposition, viewer as a change being, viewer and his or her aesthetic psyche, and viewer as a complex personality. The research examined findings along the concepts of a passive or an active viewer and constructed the following characteristics: the viewer – covets, selects, reflects, discerns, seeks to engage. Viewer behavior was also manifested emotionally. In regard to the emotional disposition dimension, the following characteristics emerged – emotionally highly affected, self-assured is in an excitable status in everything about national change, and is impatient. The next is an active identity of viewer as a change thirsty being. This overarches the selection, interpretation, and experiencing of incoming television news. Lastly, there is the dimension of viewer's aesthetic psyche and the research constructs a viewer who takes aesthetic pleasure in the twists and turns and the dramatic in the ongoing national change story.

In terms of viewer *motives* the research revealed the following: first the viewer proactively seeks something from the encounter. Secondly, a core motivation is to receive information from the change frontier especially of new details on whether there is movement or none, on its emerging features, illumination of catalysts, vision as well as values. Thirdly is the motive of oversight and playing a supervisory role over national affairs from the office of his or her mind and heart. Fourthly, there is the motive to receive content that is put together through journalistic endevour and be gratified with excellence in method. Lastly, there is the informational motive with main dimensions of being updated, gaining greater understanding, being empowered, and penetrating the hidden.

In terms of viewer affinity to TV genres. The study revealed that there are the national situation change news genre, marriage of a montage genre rooted in an epic story genre – a montage/epic genre, a news as spectacle genre, irony embedded news types, a happiness story news genre, the human tragedy genre, the horror news genre, and the grotesque news genre. Each was mainly linked to the national change story that took the form of an epic/montage genre. The research further explored news sub-genre in terms of content. To get to the heart of this, the respondents were asked give a special name to the television set at home in light of what it did for them. Striking names were that the set is an updater, a bridge, a passport, a rear mirror, a microscope, and a liar. Each evokes a number of echoes but each mainly point to a specific direction of content, a specific design or sub-genre. The national situation change genre dominates the other television news genres in its attraction to the viewer. Its characteristics are as follows - television news as a hypertext of national and society change situation; This hypertext defines the change situation, its status, features, catalysts, vision and values.

4.2 Emerging Key TV News Aesthetics

First is the process of the intertext and master symbols in which the research found the National and societal change master symbol to be dominant. This national change master symbol was also the key filter in the process of intertextuality. Intertextuality was itself the key dynamic in the process of television news viewing; This national change master symbol functions as a sentinel surveillance type in its filtering process.

The hypertext emerged as a key TV news aesthetic. The hypertext is highly ideological and is preoccupied with three ideologies of the western world's version of modernity, the ideology of self-identity, and the ideology of naturalism and renaissance. The hypertext is also an aesthetic text which is anchored on a surrealistic realism montage that is simultaneously and nevertheless part of a national change epic genre. It generates strong rhetorical emotions. The hypertext has four core layers of meaning – of event as seen in the news, event as representation or document of, event as defining the national situation, and event as a definer of the way the national leadership is seen to regard the viewer – a relational definition. While these layers are identified here as separate, they are nevertheless mainly around the national change situation.

4.3 The nature of the encounter process?

In relation to the question on the nature of the encounter process between the TV and the viewer; first, it seemed that the main viewer preoccupation at the encounter was change at the national situation. The definition of the national situation was further linked to self-viewer definition in relation to one's self identity as a Kenyan. In addition, it defined the viewer's self-identity in relation to his or her ethnic community. Lastly, it defined his or her own self-identity at the personal level. The national change or static situation preoccupation dominated the spectrum of assessment, selection, interpretation, and experiencing of news at the encounter.

Secondly, there was the construction of viewer and the news encounter interaction, and emerging ideologies of change**.** It emerged that an ideology of national modernizing along the western world's version of modernity is coveted by the viewer. It is unquestioned in the viewer and a good part of what it should be or what it involves is hidden and is unknown by the viewer. Ideologies of class, and identity also emerge within this modernity worldview. The self-identity ideologies which overshadow at the encounter are those of ethnicity, nationalism, self-consciousness and assurance (individualism), and of a hegemonic proliferate (of the international modernity ideology). These ideologies specify the preoccupations of modernity related change that dominates the selection, interpretation and experiencing of news at the encounter. The self-identity ideologies also map out an inner layer of change expected and hoped for in the viewer – the change of the self-situation and the community situation as catalyzed by the change of the national situation – and therefore change in the very self-identity. This too is coveted by the viewer at the encounter and the research interprets it as being part of the impatience and a sense of frustration in viewer.

Lastly, there are viewer expectations that the extreme individualism demonstrated by national leadership and by behavior in criminal members of society needs to change to a counterpoint of a higher society values behavior. These are bulletin summaries of dimensions selected in the research of each of the three research questions and the findings under them in the research. It is from them that a further selection of dimensions is carried out and those selected are then put together to form Three main claims of this research which are discussed subsequently.

5. *Discussion*

Literature in qualitative research argues that all processes of the research are taking place all the time across the duration of the study. Interpretation for example took place as categories and coding were emerging and also during the data analysis. This short section however is dedicated to the interpretation of the claims and to a discussion of how they integrate. According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), this part of the research should compose of an integrative interpretation of what has been learned in the research. It should develop linkages and a story line of what happens in answer to the research questions. In addition, it should evaluate the data for its usefulness and centrality (Marshall C. & Rossman G. 2011, p 219).

5.1 TV Viewership as a complex communication process

The first claim argues that there is a complex process which takes place as a TV viewer is engaged in the activity of watching TV news. The viewer is active and selects, interprets and experiences the incoming news quickly and thoroughly.

A key process of communication that takes place at this encounter is one of *intertext*. An intertext process seems to work through a sentinel surveillance orientation almost as if the master symbols that occur between the TV and the viewer aggressively jump at incoming news and impose their will on them. In coming news is selected, interpreted, and experienced mainly through a strong and preoccupying *master symbol in viewer* – that of national and society change. Two other underlying master symbols of self identity and the aesthetic master symbol of the epic/montage national change story are intimately linked to the earlier master symbol and the three form a meta symbol that dominates the encounter through an intertext process. Meanwhile, the national change version looked for by the viewer is the western modernity.

Intertext takes place through a process of filtering, the master symbol being the filters through which what has happened is apprehended and cast away except that which relates to master symbol which then is taken through the fusion process. The research interprets this to mean that the master symbols become fusion points for amplification and intensification of reported reality. They also provide the very fiery ingredients that fuse combatively with the meaning of incoming news.

What can be said to be lessons learned from this claim? Three are prioritized – first, that the encounter between the television viewer and the incoming news is a *power relations site*. In this regard, the viewer dominates the site and it is not possible to propose media influence upon such a viewer. Neither does the configuration of audience reception studies seem to capture the actual character of this site; for the word *reception* primarily underlines passivity on the receiver while the giver is elevated to greater activity and presence. Examining the encounter site from this perspective seems to offer a new way of understanding this site's kind of communication, that indeed, while others have constructed the notion of a resistant viewer, again the findings of this research see conquest rather than resistance.

Secondly, that the encounter between the viewer and the incoming news is *emotionally disturbing* to the viewer and seems to have the consequence of aggravating his or her sense of hurt and impatience with the national leadership. The media is trusted to keep its eyes focused on the change story but it seems to keep looking back and this is another source of frustration by viewer. Unlike the conventional argument that the viewer is not looking for positive- works- news, the viewer actually longs for such in regard to the change story. The viewer is defined by this desire for change and this identity dominates his or her interaction with what is happening in the country.

The third lesson is that it seems common to the research viewer that he or she will construct three priority components of meaning drawn from incoming news – *what has happened, why it has happened, and how it represents what has been happening.* These are constructed at the speed of intuition and it seems to be the case that even if news comes to the viewer in great brevity, the viewer concludes a comprehensive picture for himself or herself. Therefore, there is a viewer who is seeking a change in his or her own self-identity and who expects that permutations at the national change frontier will result into changes of personal and family fortunes.

These were lessons learned and their significance. The claim integrates understanding of aspects of each of the three research questions – on viewer typology, key news aesthetics, and on the nature of the encounter process and offers a coherent story line. Surprising to the research was this viewer preoccupation with the *concept of change* and how it is such a key factor as the viewer interacts with in coming news. At the beginning of the research, it was expected that a number of factors could be present during the moment of viewing and it was suggested that perhaps, income preoccupation may stand out. This did not happen.

5.2. Epic/Montage National Change Story in TV Viewership

The study reveals a hyper genre of the epic/montage national change story that emerges at the encounter between the news viewer and the incoming news. This hyper genre re-assembles the brief, scanty, and unconnected news reports and fashions them into a powerful communication between the news and the viewer. This finding is a departure from the dominant understanding in TV literature that the short reports of news cannot allow comprehension and understanding of what is going on. For the research, this is another new perspective. For the viewer, the brief news account is not on its own but is part of a present and past dramatic story of a nation and a society change in which the viewer is also a player.

The event account is not only factual, is not only a sign of a water-head undercurrent of a change force, but also draws in the viewer into a continuous dramatic story in which he or she has become attached to one side. Reality reported is given human faces to represent and to hate, like or be angry with in viewer. The research argues that this aesthetic of the television news has four strands. These are a crescent of the water-head undercurrent, the human epic faces that epitomize forces of change and static in the conflict, and the plot like drama of twists and turns of the conflict.Viewer involvement has three consequences – they intensify viewer experience, the emotions generated harden and firm the convictions that are contained in the master symbols, and the blend of the emotions and thoughts creates the desire to seek more information on what is to happen next. The research considers this to be a new perspective and urges that more work be carried out on it in further research. Above all, the research considers this epic/montage genre in television news to be the dominant aesthetic in the news. This is new.

4.3 TV News as a strong emotional site

Another critical finding in this study is that news viewing produces strong and disturbing emotions in the TV viewer. In the research, viewers mostly settled to watch news in the evening at the time when they hoped to rest and relax from the day's work. TVis watched together with the family to simultaneously gratify their quest and thirst to know what is going on particularly in regard to national change and by implication, their own change. From this perspective, the TV news then is a great disruption of the evening in terms of an evening of relaxation and a joint family watches. The strong and negative emotions generated at the encounter document a disturbing experience by viewer. This is new and so is the detailing into different emotions of this experiencing. This claim responds to the third research question on the nature of the encounter process but also helps to construct the viewer type which is the focus of the first question as well as the news aesthetics in the second question.

A key lesson learnt from this argument is that TV news touches the viewer at the inner chamber of feelings where he or she comes alive and is animated. The character of combativeness which seems to be triggered in viewer adds to this state of coming alive.

Another lesson from the claim is that the negative emotions that the viewer herself or himself identifies and articulates are themselves a cry and a longing for positive news at the frontier of change. Conventional understanding about news is that viewers are not looking for positive stories but such stories gave great happiness to the viewers in the current research. This is important for media workers. The research also identifies the sub genres of this happiness giving news accounts and this too is new in scholarship. Most research on TV news which has touched on viewer emotions has been on the moral panic category alone in which fear is created in viewers of insecurity and devaluation of morals in society. The current research focuses on a more comprehensive examination of emotions generated by in coming news and this too is new.

6. Conclusions

This research argues that looking at the moment of the encounter between the viewer and the incoming news – in a way the primordial communication moment – produces new resources to examine TV news communication. As the paper concludes, the above issues are prioritized and simplified as direct answers to the three research questions. The first question asks – what type of viewer is present at the encounter between the TV news viewer and the incoming news? The research finding is that the TV viewer is a disturbed, reflective, and dominant person at the moment of encounter with incoming news. The second question focuses on the what television news genres or sub-genres emerge at the viewer and news encounter? The finding is that an epic news genre dominates the encounter between the TV viewer and incoming news. Finally, the third research question was on the process of the encounter and the findings were as follows: That the key process at the encounter is that of intertextuality through a process of filtering and a combative fusion.

7. References

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