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Media Discourse: News as a form of Entertainment/ Popular Culture

Introduction

With the advance of science and technology, communication has improved tremendously over the last two decades or so. The increase in communicative technology has made it possible for one to not only communicate with the world by literally sitting in ones own home, but also to experience and enjoy the cultures of people from around the globe despite being separated by time and space. The defying of the time and space continuum also means the media itself has gone through a sea change, which has had great impact on the entertainment industry, popular culture and the news.

The west, particularly America, has experienced more significant phases of transition in the mass media than elsewhere. The dramatics of sensationalism as wells as the entertaining values of the entertainment industry have somehow become part of the news. During the past quarter of a century, news has changed greatly in the United States. Due to the "intensely competitive media environment created by cable news and entertainment, news outlets have softened their coverage" (Patterson, 2000: 2).

In Malaysia, the influence of the entertainment industry and / or popular culture in the news has until recently been somewhat limited. With the increase in the number of television channels in this multicultural and multiethnic nation, the need for 'rating' is surfacing the competitive nature as well as the creative abilities of the competitors. The notion of competitiveness coupled with the need to attract certain target audience is becoming more apparent than when there was less competition; this apparentness may be

perceived not only in the ideology of the various channels and the programmes they air, but also in the English news.

Underlying Principle

News is not merely informative but can also be entertaining at the same time. The choice of newsworthy materials, besides other factors, depends to a certain extent on the target audience. Most news programmes usually aims to inform the audience about the current affairs of the local and foreign / international scenario. Since their prime objective is to inform rather than inform and entertain, they may not always cater to the modern young generation. However, 8TV gives precedence to the ideology of their target audience and base their choice of news items on the interest of the 'young urban' within the age group of 15-35.

This paper intends to compare the English news of Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) *TV1* and *8TV*, and illustrate the various elements of the entertainment industry / popular culture in the news from an ideological-semiotic perspective. In doing so, it is hoped that news may be viewed not only as a source of current information and happenings but also as a form of entertainment / popular culture.

Ideological Insight: *RTM TV1* and *8TV*

With the recent introduction of two new channels, Malaysia now has six channels in total—*RTM TV1* and *TV2*, *TV3*, *NTV7*, *8TV* and *C9* (Channel Nine). All the channels have their own ideologies, which they try to propagate through the choice of programmes and the approach they adopt in promoting and airing them. The programme selection and the mode of approach to attract the target audience somewhat depends on the understanding of their psyche; however, as Malaysia is a country with many diversities it is crucial to comprehend the complexities of the psyche of the target audience in terms of psychographics.

The ideologies of the six local channels vary in range; some adopt a rather didactic ideology while others more commercial. However, the degree of didacticism or commercialism depends on the ideology the channels wish to project to the target audience, which may be a specific group or the general mass. The extent to which a channel is didactic or commercial may be better comprehended if perceived in the form of a 'commercialism continuum' (Figure 1). The ends of the continuum represent the extreme divergence of either a

didactic or a commercial ideology, while the intermediate seems to reside in a state of transition.

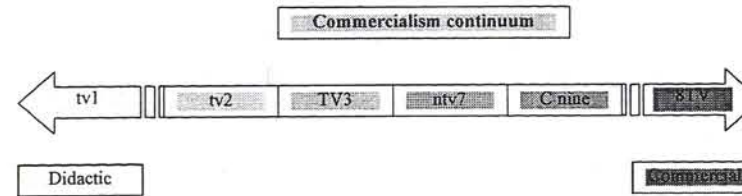


FIGURE 1
Continuum
illustrating the
degree of
didacticism or
Commercialism

As the national channel of Malaysia, RTM *TV1* has to uphold certain values and moral standards, and at the same time propagate its ideology of 'supporting the country's vision' while ensuring a 'high standard of broadcasting'. It does this through 'programmes that are informative and educational' which provides 'up to date information' as well as 'instil good values'. Keeping with the government's policies and aspirations it tries to cater to the varied tastes to the society (Radio Television Malaysia, 2003). Though *TV1* broadcasts most of its programmes in the national language (Bhasa Malayu) *TV2*, also a network of RTM, broadcasts in Chinese, English, Malay and Tamil (Davies, 2004).

Since its maiden broadcast on 28th December 1963 in black and white, the *First Channel*, as it was then called to later become *RTM1* in 1978 and finally *TV1* in 1990 (Radio Television Malaysia, 2003), it has withstood the test of time. At present *TV1* is the forerunner as a news-providing channel and broadcasts news bulletins round the clock. Its Current Affairs Unit, part of the RTM's News and Current Affairs Division, besides the various types of current affairs programmes, dedicates itself by informing and updating the public with the latest developments in local and global news almost every hour in the mornings and every two hours from noon onwards, seven days a week.

Among the commercial channels, *8TV* is one of the most, if not the most, commercial of all. It began broadcasting on 8th January 2004 with the intention of targeting two distinct audiences—the *niche audience*², that is, the English / young urban (within the age group of 15-35) and the mass Chinese audience. The young innovative minds of its staff, who's average age is 27, creatively breaks away from conventionality by turning traditional television watching into a more interactive and entertaining experience, which

epitomizes their motto “we’re different”. The first step they took towards making connection with their target audience, before the launching of the channel, was a successful series of creative print and radio advertisements. In the words of the station’s chief operating officer, Ahmad Izham Omar, “The advertisements have been getting an interesting response from the young folks. A lot of them like the different ad style” (The Star online, Friday January 2, 2004).

The programmes of 8TV are selected to appeal to the ideology of its target audience. Many of the Chinese programmes cater to the mass Chinese audience while the English and some of the Chinese to the young urban audience. To make the experience of watching 8TV interactive there are some live segments and programmes, like *The 8TV Quickie* (twice every day) and *Latte at Eight* (twice every week). To appeal to the ideology of the young urban audience, the programmes are exciting and entertaining as opposed to being instructive and didactic. This does not mean to say that they lack in moral value or wisdom. Rather it could be said that the programmes make one live through the various experiences of life that one may not ordinarily get the chance to do so, and in the process gain ideological insight into practical experience of life itself; the audience can identify themselves with the themes of the programmes as they are from the popular culture genre.

What is News?

Before embarking on the discussion of hard and soft news, it might be worthwhile to ask ourselves ‘What is news?’ A very general definition may suggest that it is the reporting of recent or current events or information as reported by the mass media—newspapers, periodicals, radio, television—or the new media—the internet. In practical terms, such a generalization could prove difficult to generate a consensus. Jamieson and Campbell (2001: 40) think that:

Despite many efforts, no neat, satisfactory answer to that question has been found. Some deaths are news; many more are not. Some strikes draw headlines; others are ignored. Some protests become lead stories; others go unnoticed; still others are deliberately disregarded. The best answer seems to be that news is what reporters, editors, producers decide is news.

In similar fashion, the O. J. Simpson Murder trial, dubbed as trial of the century, and the death and the funeral of Princess Diana, dubbed as the death of the century, received intense media

coverage. These events did not concern or effect major world issues, yet they tremendously influenced the ratings of news programmes. In fact, Mother Teresa, dubbed as the living saint when she was alive, who died a week after Princess Diana did not receive so much media coverage as her. Even though she had dedicated her life for the cause of humanity she was not so newsworthy as compared to Princess Diana, popularly known as 'the people's princess'.

It should be remembered that news is gathered, written, edited, produced and disseminated by human beings who are members of organizations who have certain ideological beliefs. Such organizations may have their own functions and goals but they also have to maintain their relationship with the government, regulatory agencies, their parent companies, and the audience they seek to attract. Such relationships are bound to influence the message a news programme broadcasts (Jamieson and Campbell, 2001: 40). From a more commercial perspective, news may also be "based increasingly on what will interest an audience rather than on what the audience needs to know" (Patterson, 2000: 3). News of celebrities—whether from sports or the entertainment industries—scandals, entertainment, popular culture, lifestyle, fashion, and so on and so forth helps compete for ratings because such information are of wide interest to various audience and therefore newsworthy enough to be viewed as news on news programmes rather than on entertainment programmes.

Hard news vs. Soft News

The format and the content of newsworthy material may vary from media to media—print, electronic or the New Media; time, space and instantaneity are also significant in determining the makeup of the news. News is generally divided into hard and soft news. *Hard news* may be defined as the reporting of an event that has happened or that was disclosed within the last twenty-four hours and deal with an ongoing concern (Jamieson and Campbell, 2001: 40). Franklin (1997: 4) uses the term 'Newszak' to describe the softer or lighter version of news as opposed to hard news; similarly, Hoggart (1995: 20) uses the term 'Filet O'Facts'. *Soft news* has also been referred to as 'the new News' (Kalb, in Patterson, 2000: 2), and "soft journalism" (Nisbet, 2001) or "infotainment"³ (Patterson, 2000: 3; Nisbet, 2001). Patterson (2000), in his research report, makes a distinction between the two:

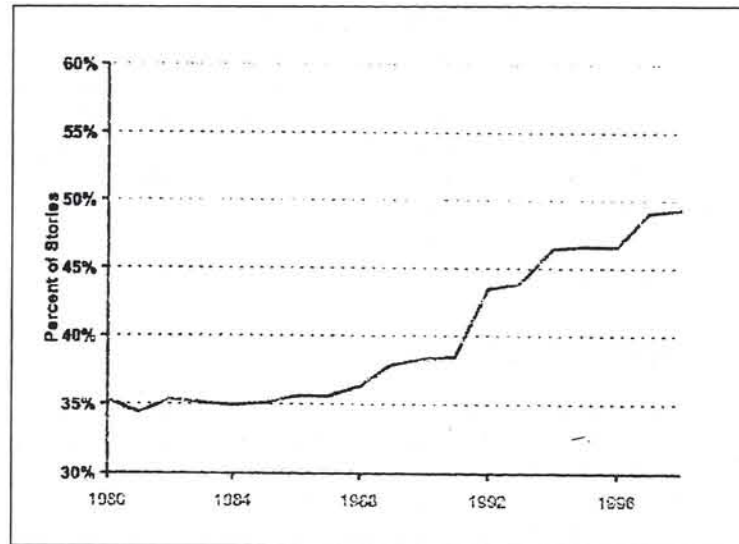
Soft news is sometimes used in a way that implies it is all the news that is not "hard news."⁴ Hard news refers to coverage of breaking events involving top leaders, major issues, or significant disruption in the routines of daily life, such as an earthquake or airline disaster.⁵ Information about these events is presumably important to citizens' ability to understand and respond to the world of public affairs.⁶ News that is not of this type is, by definition, "soft."

(Patterson, 2000: 3)

According to this standard, Patterson (2000: 3), based on his findings, illustrated with a chart (Figure 2) that soft news (in America) has increased dramatically from 35 percent in 1980 to almost 50 percent today (i.e. towards the end of last century).

FIGURE 2
Increase in
News Stories
without a
Public Policy
Component.
(i.e. Soft
News)

Source:
Adapted from
Patterson,
2000: 3



Hard news and soft news both have their usefulness and the precedence of one over the other, depends on many factors, which may include ideology, rating, target audience, so on and so forth. Some critics are of the opinion that "soft news may actually be eroding people's interest in news," while others say that it "brings some people to the news who would not otherwise pay attention and who would otherwise be seen less informed" (Patterson, 2000: 3).

News as Entertainment / Popular Culture

The term entertainment is rather obscure and is open to debate, but entertainment in terms of popular culture, portrayed on the screen of the all too familiar square box, may be a little less incomprehensible. Simply defined, it may be an activity of any nature that possesses the capacity to hold the attention of an audience or participants with something that amuses, pleases or even diverts, like a performance or a show.

However, when there is a specific medium, namely the television, trying to attract the attention of a specific target audience with certain post-modern tendencies, entertainment becomes synonymous with popular culture. According to Brereton (2001: 134) popular culture is the "study of all forms of popular entertainment", which can range from comics, films and television to dance and music. He elaborates:

The mass media represents a major proportion of what has come to be described as popular culture ... the legitimacy of popular culture focus on the valuing of audiences' pleasures rather than dismissing them like early Marxists, who remained fixated by the dangers of manipulation of mass audiences and the possibility of succumbing to false consciousness. Audiences' pleasures can no longer be dismissed out of hand by elitist critics who appear to have a higher order of value built into their analysis.

(Brereton, 2001: 134)

It is the 'audiences' pleasures' that many news programmes focus upon, and if the audience that a particular channel is targeting happen to be a specific group, say for instance the young urban, then the news items will be selected in order to cater to their interests.

Carter and Allan (in Berry, 2000: 138) says that though the gap between 'news' (by which they probably mean hard news) and 'entertainment' (probably soft news) is narrowing, some commentators, who dispute this view, are of the opinion that news values are going through a process of democratisation. They go on to say that such commentators believe that people want 'news you can use', meaning news that they can identify themselves with, rather than the news of politicians and other 'talking heads'; this results in the 'tabloidisation' of international news coverage and

increases the concern with “local issues as it does with ever sharper ‘efficiency cuts’ in the financial budgets of news organisations”.

Fiske (1992: 281) correctly says that news is a commodity that requires an audience. In order to ensure an audience and be sellable (as it is expensive to produce) at the same time to producers and advertisers it must be popular. However, popularity has a price tag, which may be defined by the contemporary entertainment values; the relevance of this value is so significant to news that Goodwin (1990: 45) points out that the lead story in one of the main BBC news programmes, in 1980, was about the ‘Who shot J. R.?’ episode of *Dallas*, a very popular American soap opera.

Though, there are divided opinions regarding news as a form of entertainment or infotainment, it has its usefulness in the sense that the entertainment qualities may help to attract audience who do not usually watch news programmes dominated by hard news. In this regard, Reuss (1999: 231) says that:

The infotainment media often appeal to audience that give little, if any, attention to more serious media. In that respect, those that contain even minimal amounts of information can help these people make decisions—they can help make democracy work.

The fact that the entertainment aspect of news increases rating cannot be denied. In Malaysia, as in many other countries the grandiose Hollywood awards like the Academy Awards, Golden Globe Awards, Screen Actor’s Guild Awards, just to name a few, are important items of news just as the sensational news of Britney Spears’ French kiss with Madonna, her brief wedding and annulment episode or the breast bearing episode of Janet Jackson as well as the ongoing trial of her brother Michael Jackson’s child molestation case. In recent weeks the British Media has given wide coverage to David Beckham’s affair with Rebecca Loos (Beckham’s personal assistant in Spain, and daughter of a Dutch diplomat) and Sarah Marbeck (a Malaysian-born model) and how he and his wife, Victoria (Posh Spice, former member of the pop group Spice Girls), are dealing with the allegations. The media follows them everywhere, and they have used this to their advantage to make a public show of unity to suggest that their marriage is as strong as ever. The media is also in love with Beckham’s ever changing hairstyle. His recent metamorphosis which saw him shave off his

golden locks to adopt a 'skinhead' style, may be to divert attention from his widely publicised allegations that has landed him on the cover page of all the major newspapers in England on 20 April, 2004. In fact, the Beckhams are afforded the same kind of media coverage as the royal family in UK. David Beckham, like other celebrities, is covered by the media in not only his country but also, more or less, all over the world. The media's fascination with Beckham may be because he is the embodiment of popular culture and any information of him that is disclosed to the public is news, though more of a softer kind. From this perspective, it seems that news may be perceived as a form of entertainment and / or popular culture.

Theoretical Assumptions

In general, television news may be viewed as a formal and structured entity, following certain conventions, which distinguishes it from other programmes. However, technological advancement and increased communication abilities in this age of information juxtaposed with the influx of entertainment and popular cultural values, the formal structure of news is being challenged; the reality of the situation is quite apparent in the West, especially America. This trend of challenging the formal structure of news programmes is also becoming quite apparent in Malaysia as well. Competition for rating and audience acceptability are challenging the conventional view of news.

This study focuses on the perception of news from an audience perspective. It tries to examine the formal and the informal aspects of news to identify the element of entertainment / popular culture, by comparing the news of RTM *TV1 (News on 1)* with that of 8TV (*Twentyhundred*). This small-scale study adopted a non-experimental, exploratory paradigm. In order for the audience to be able to make easy distinctions between the news of the two channels, the analysis is primarily based on the observation of the news in real time; the analysis is not the outcome of recording, transcribing and reading between the lines.

The theoretical assumptions are loosely based on the combination of van Dijk's (1998) multidisciplinary approach to ideology and Saussure's concept of sign (Chandler, 2002). Van Dijk essentially perceives ideology in terms of "the 'triangle' of (social) *cognition, society and discourse*" (1998: 313). As the mental properties of ideologies are socially acquired, they are *both* mental and social; socially they are shared and defined by social *groups*.

In general, social group ideologies *indirectly* monitor *social practices* through discourse and communication (Van Dijk, 1998: 13-17). Saussure's 'dyadic' (two-part) model of sign comprises of a 'signifier' and a 'signified' (Chandler, 2002: 18). He perceives a linguistic sign as a link between "a concept [signified] and a sound pattern [signifier]" (Saussure, 1983: 66). However, nowadays though the basic 'Saussurean' model is followed, it tends to be a more materialistic one than what Saussure had perceived it to be; "the *signifier* is now commonly interpreted as the *material (or physical) form* of the sign—it is something which can be seen, heard, touched, smelled or tasted" (Chandler, 2002: 19).

Data

The raw data was collected by observing the *News on 1* (RTM *TV1*) and *Twentyhundred* (8TV) in real time over a period of approximately three and a half months, that is, from 8th January 2004 (the launching of 8TV) till 15th May 2004. It was possible to observe both the news in real time as they were (and still are) aired at different hours; *News on 1* is aired from 6.00 - 6.30 p.m., seven days a week, while *Twentyhundred* from 8.00 – 8.30 p.m. on week days. RTM *TV1* broadcasts news in English three times a day of which *News on 1* is the main one; the other two bulletins comprise of *World News*, aired from 9.00 – 9.10 a.m., and *Midnight News Update*, from 12.00 – 12.10 a.m. On the other hand, *Twentyhundred* is the only English news broadcast by 8TV.

Analysis

Van Dijk's multidisciplinary approach (to ideology) may be used to comprehend the ideology of the target audience (the young / English urban) and then key into their psyche, in terms of psychographics. The elements from entertainment / popular culture that the target audience can identify themselves with are then incorporated into the news (*Twentyhundred*). It is this incorporation that aids the viewer (audience) to make the connection with the reader, and hence view the news as a form of entertainment and / or popular culture. This connection may be explained by means of the more common interpretation of the 'Saussurean' concept of sign.

If the entire news discourse of *Twentyhundred* is perceived as a single piece of text⁷, it may be subjected to a semiotical analysis in term of signifier and signified. Tolson (1996: 17) points out that

the basic principles of text analysis may be applied to any kind of media text:

That is to say, all texts consist of signs, in which the reader / viewer is invited to associate certain physical or material forms (signifiers) with certain mental processes (signifieds). The signifiers do not necessarily look like the signifieds so, in making these associations, it is necessary to learn culturally specific codes and conventions. On the one hand, these are codes which may be shared by every member of a culture (for example, everyone who speaks the same language); but on the other, they may be very specific indeed (such as targeting that relatively small section of the population who can remember bits of dialogue from *Casablanca*).

It is the 'specific codes' or elements of entertainment / popular culture in *Twentyhundred*, which are shared by the 'relatively small section of the population' (the 'young urban'), that make the association with them, who in turn can identify the 'culturally specific codes and conventions' in the news (*Twentyhundred*). So what are the elements of entertainment / popular culture in *Twentyhundred*? The findings seem to suggest the following elements: structural, thematic, linguistic, technical, commercial and interpersonal (Figure 3). Such elements are either absent or not so prominent in *News on 1*.

Findings

The findings may become more apparent if *News on 1* and *Twentyhundred* are compared and contrasted. It should be remembered that the findings are primarily based on spontaneous observation of both of the news broadcasts in real time. The study could very well be replicated to yield similar results provided that the observations are made over a substantial period of time.

The entire format of *News on 1* is very structured and uniform in nature. It opens with the conventional headlines, which introduces the leading or most important, local and international, news stories. The headlines give precedence to local news, unless there is breaking news at the international level. The entire text (news) is divided into several segments, each introduced by a formal sub-headline—Foreign News, Biz News, Sports News. There are two other regular segments—technological news and the whether—which are introduced verbally by the anchor and then visually by advertisements that sponsor them. The news closes with the repeat of the main / opening headlines, giving a kind of symmetrical

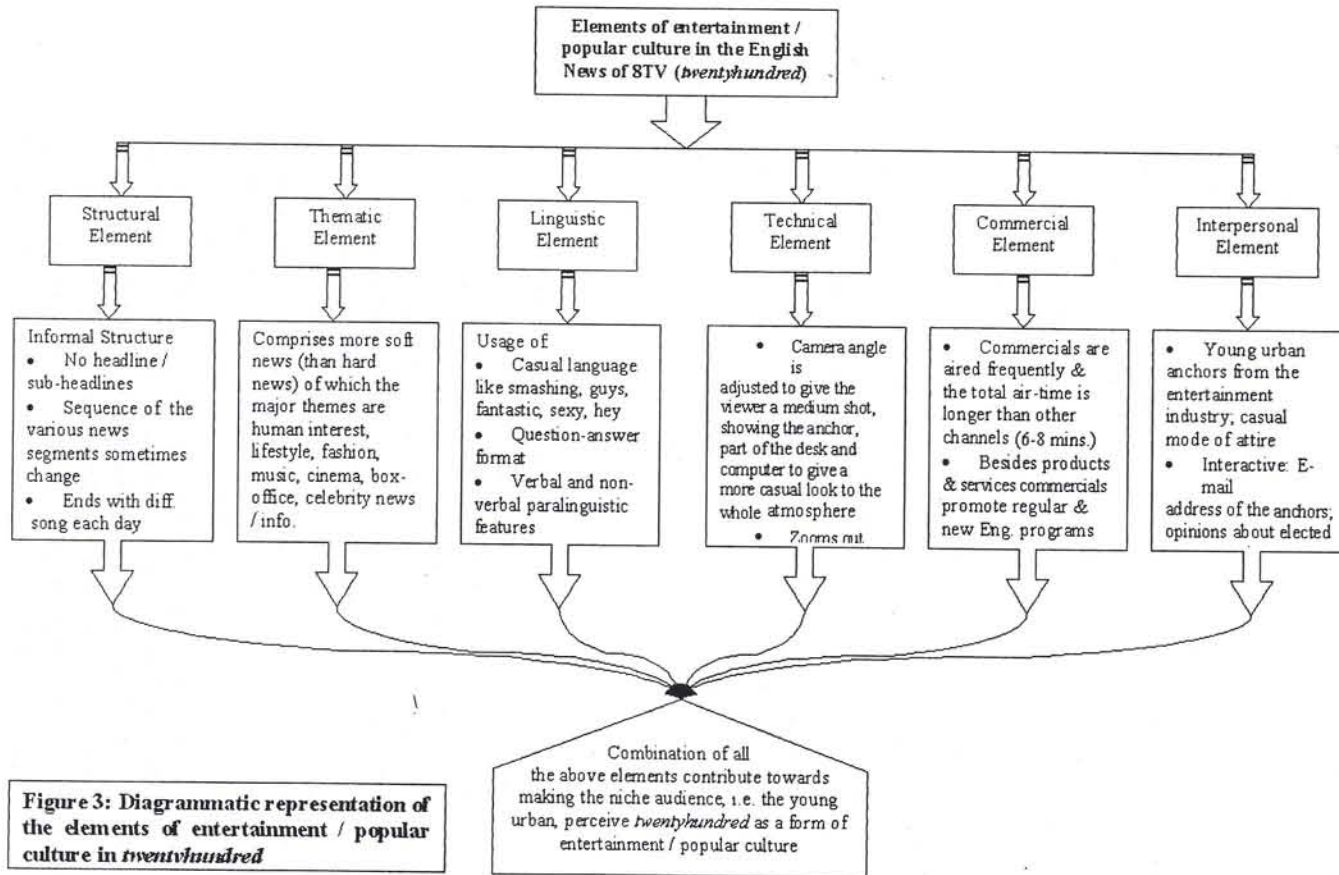


Figure 3: Diagrammatic representation of the elements of entertainment / popular culture in *twentyhundred*

uniformity to the whole structure. Another sense of uniformity is conveyed by means of the theme music which is played during the opening and closing headlines as well as the sub-headlines.

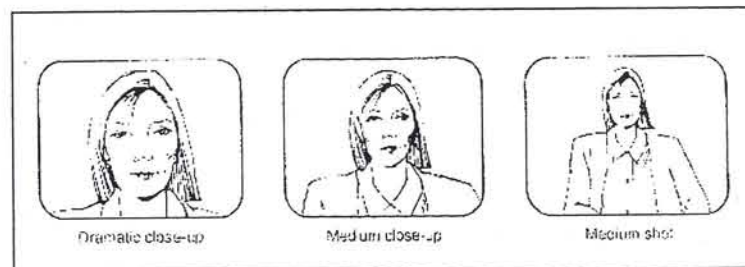
The format of *Twentyhundred* is not so structured as that of *TV1*; it does not contain any headlines or sub-headlines. A rough sequence of the various segments would be something like local news, foreign news, stories of human interest, entertainment news, weather, sports news. Though this sequence is generally followed, sometimes it changes, and as there are no formal introductory headlines it is difficult to predict what news will follow. Initially when the channel was first launched, there was no sequence at all; it was more like a montage. The news closes with a different video footage of songs everyday. The informal structure gives *Twentyhundred* a sense of novelty and helps to create a casual atmosphere, which may convey a sense of 'seriousness⁸', if such a term could be used.

The themes of the content of *News on 1* mostly comprises of serious stately, worldly issues dominated by hard news. The seriousness of the themes portrays a pessimistic world full of violence, cruelty, conflicting politics and intolerance. *Twentyhundred* on the other hand, predominates with soft news, the themes of which include news stories of human interest, fashion, lifestyle, music, cinema, box-office, celebrity news, as well as other entertainment and / or popular cultural themes. Such themes convey a sense of 'take it easy and relax', an optimistic outlook towards life.

The language used on *News on 1* is very formal and is narrated by the anchors, at most times, with an emotionless expression in a persistently uniform manner. Equally uniform is the perpetual unwavering narrative voice of the anchors. *Twentyhundred* makes use of various linguistic features to project a spontaneous and natural atmosphere. The use of language, though formal, has its share of casual-colloquial vocabulary and usages, like 'smashing', 'fantastic', 'hey, hey guys', 'sexy birthday party', 'sexy eastern accent', 'gorgeous tract, just can't stop yapping, shake his booty'. The question-answer format is regularly employed, where the anchor asks the audience an intriguing question and then proceeds to give the answer. The usage of verbal and non-verbal paralinguistic features help to enhance the conversational manner of the narrative.

FIGURE 4
Common
television
camera shots

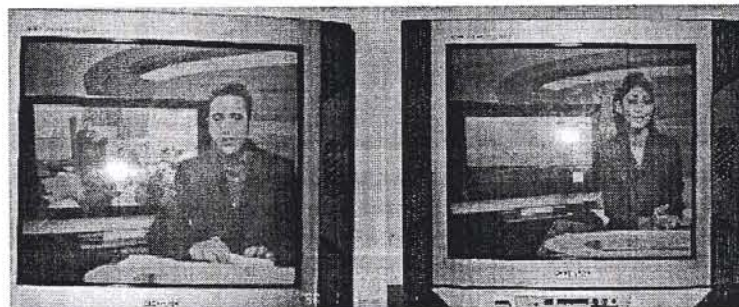
Source:
Jamieson and
Campbell,
2001: 84



Among the common television camera shots (Figure 4) like the 'dramatic close-up', the 'medium close-up' and the 'medium shot'⁹ (Jamieson and Campbell, 2001: 84), both *News on 1* and *Twentyhundred*, use the 'medium shot' on most occasions. However, in *Twentyhundred* the 'medium shot' is somewhat extended to include a flat screened television in the background and the news-desk with partial view of the letter 8 (of 8TV) in the foreground. The anchor sits in a relaxed, comfortable position behind the desk in a very casual manner, sometimes slightly leaning towards the right side (Figure 5). This lends to a very cosy and casual atmosphere, almost like a talk-show host. The zooming out during the wrap-up / closing of the news, to give a somewhat panoramic (wider) view of the set, seems to convey a message from the anchor saying 'this is where I work'. This may help to enhance the reader / viewer casual relationship.

FIGURE 5
Common
camera shot
used in
Twentyhundred

Source:
Twentyhundred,
8TV



Extended medium-shot

News on 1 has only one facet or dimension of commercial element, that is the commercials that are aired (mostly) in between the various news segments. The commercials are about the products and services that sponsor the news and usually run for a total time of approximately two minutes. *Twentyhundred* on the other hand, displays multilateral dimensions of the commercial element. The whole news programme is designed in such a manner that it seems to have become a gateway for information, entertainment and advertisements. Some of the news stories seem to endorse commercial products like the 'Parker 100' series pen and the 'Bustfree', women's artificial breast enhancer (see the comments on the next page). The advertisements / commercials themselves are entertaining and informative in the sense that they keep one updated with everything and all the recent happenings of the channel. This is possible because unlike *News on 1*, *Twentyhundred* besides advertising sponsoring products and services of the news also airs commercial that promote regular and new English programmes, upcoming events like the 'Malaysian Idol' and new or upcoming cinema / box-office releases. To make the commercials interesting and appealing, hip expressions and semiotic visuals are used to introduce the daily (i.e. weekday) English programmes—*Kick A. Monday* (accompanied by a fighting depiction), *Girly Tuesday* (flowery image), *Popcorn n' Wednesday* (image of a movie camera, reel, and popcorns), *Tantalizing Thursday* (image of seductive women), *Friday Night Fever* (depictions of action and excitement). The commercials, aired in four to five segments during the course of the news, if combined into one segment would probably be longer than any other news segment of *Twentyhundred*, about 6-8 minutes.

Presumably, the primary reason why *Twentyhundred* is so unique and different from *News on 1*, and able to key into the psyche of its target audience is because of its interpersonal or human element. It fosters this element through its 'young urban' anchors with background and experience from the local entertainment industry—Sumitra Selvaraj (former Survivor Girl—*nTV7*), Mesh Nair (former *Hitz.fm* deejay) and Sireen Shidu (sports commentator, during the 2002 world cup—*TV3*). The anchors bring along with them a casual atmosphere (as opposed to the formal atmosphere of *News on 1*); this is reflected in their tight fitting attire (trendy / fashionable yet relaxing) which is adorned in a casual manner (Sumitra, sometimes without blazer / jacket; Mesh, always without a tie), changing hairstyle (Sumitra and Sireen) and freshness

in their attitude and mode of presentation. Another aspect of the interpersonal element is that *Twentyhundred* is very interactive with its audience, something which *News on 1* lacks. The e-mail addresses of the anchors as well as the reporters are displayed on the screen so that the viewers / audience can directly contact and write in to them. *Twentyhundred* also invites its viewers to e-mail or fax their opinions regarding their elected representatives (Assemblymen or MP). One of the most significant aspects of the human element, whether it is at the discretion of the editor or the anchors themselves, is the expressing of certain opinions and or comments. Some of the comments, with respect to the context, follows:

- "... having a sexy birthday party"—regarding a birthday thrown by a celebrity;
- "Get those creative juices flowing"—regarding Malaysian Idol, which will be hosted by 8TV;
- "My wife should be watching this"—regarding the introduction of the 'Parker 100' pen, which could be given as gifts to husbands and boyfriends;
- "...who just can't stop yapping ... here's their gorgeous tract"—about a new band;
- "She looks a little familiar, doesn't she?"—(Tag Question)—about Sarah Marbeck (the Malaysian born model who had a one night fling with David Beckham);
- "Once you've seen him shake his booty ..." regarding the 'Saturday Night Fever'—musical troupe performing in Malaysia;
- "You may be the next Malaysian Idol! Yes you." (as he says 'Yes you,' he points his finger towards the camera—like the 'Uncle Sam Poster);
- "I wonder if the judges are going to be abusive like the American counterparts,"—comparing the judges (who were selected on that day) of *Malaysian Idol* with those of *American Idol*;
- "It's a pity Steven Lim (one of reporters of 8TV) didn't get the chance of covering that story,"—regarding "Bustfree", women's artificial breast enhancer;
- "Some of you may not even have been born when this song was written, I was a break dancer,"—regarding Wham's "Wake me up before you go go"(sung by the lead singer of the band, George Michael).

The manner, the expression, the linguistic and colloquial usage (verbal and non-verbal) with which such comments are made or opinions are expressed, seem to project the notion of casual conversation. Despite the fact that “public life and private life involve different ways of using language,” (Fairclough, 1995: 8) *Twentyhundred* manages to strike up a unique blend of the two. Such a unique blend, that is the juxtaposition of the public and private discourse, is what Fairclough (1995) perceives as *conversationalization* (of discourse) which is used as a ‘marketization’ strategy. He explains:

because of the increasing commercial pressures and competition, media are being more fully drawn into operating on a market basis within the ‘leisure’ industry, and one part of that is greater pressure to entertain even within public affairs output.

(Fairclough, 1995: 10-11)

Discussion

News on 1, presumably because of the fact that it is aired on the national channel and therefore has to represent certain moral and ethical values as well as preserve the conventionality of its programmes, seems to project a formal, traditional and structured concept of news, dominated by hard news stories. It is produced for a mature audience by a mature group of people, who are oriented to reflect the ideology of the channel (RTM *TV1*) to server the interest of the nation rather than be subservient to consumerist ideology of serving the select few.

Contrary to the ideology of *News on 1*, *Twentyhundred* is very focused in attaining the attention of its select audience of the young / English urban. With the desire of catering to such an audience, the entire news programme has been designed to reflect the commercial and consumerist ideology of serving the needs and necessities of the targeted viewers. In doing so, *Twentyhundred*, tends to take a rather postmodernistic approach to presenting the news. This postmodernistic approach, apparent from the various modes of discourse—verbal, the semiotic, paralinguistic, the commercial, and so forth—is present in the news. It seems as if news has been commodified and commercialised in a unconversational manner to appeal to the *niche audience*.

FIGURE 6
The beginning
of the
countdown of
Twentyhundred

Source:
Twentyhundred,
8TV



The postmodernistic insinuation is discernible from the very onset of *Twentyhundred*, which commences with a countdown (from 10) with the semiotic visual of silhouetted women in a rather enigmatic background (Figure 6). The implication of this semiotic depiction as well as the ones that follow, sets the tone of unconventionality and reflects the motto of 8TV 'we're different'. The breaking away from tradition, in this case the traditional way of presenting and viewing news, is in itself reminiscent of postmodernism, which seems to be imbedded in the contemporary forms of entertainment and popular culture.

However, *Twentyhundred*, does not get too carried away and keeps things in perspective. The starting may be divided into two segments: countdown with the semiotic visuals is followed by a digital clock displaying the title of the news (*Twentyhundred*) in numerals; this is the beginning of the second segment, which goes on to display visuals of various news stories in infinite television screens. The uniqueness of the two-part opening of *Twentyhundred* lies in the fact that it juxtaposes two significant themes of the present era—technology and postmodernism—both which affects and influences the lives of the young / English urban, that is, the target audience that *Twentyhundred* is trying to reach out to.

Conclusion

Hard news or soft news or a combination of both in varying proportions, the decision is made for us. Whether we choose to watch the news or not, may somewhat depend on certain expectations and to what extent those expectations are met. *News on 1*, which is very structured, formal and predominates with hard news, has a standard to maintain and propagate certain moral and ethical values. It is governed by didactic principles, which deters it from making certain compromises that may threaten to lower the standards it has set itself; it is its moral duty to uphold the ideology of the national channel, *RTM TV1*. On the other hand, *Twentyhundred* tries to uphold the ideology of *8TV*, which is based on the notions of commercialization.

Despite their different ideologies and the news that *News on 1* and *Twentyhundred* dispenses, they both serve the community. They try to cater to needs of their target audience and satisfy them. The *niche audience* (young urban) of *Twentyhundred* is more specific than that of *News on 1*. In order to gratify their needs *Twentyhundred* digresses from the formal, structured and conventional news programmes that predominates with hard news. It has instead, incorporated certain elements of entertainment / popular culture and abounds with soft news; soft, light and non-serious as this news may be, it is still news to the targeted viewers of *Twentyhundred*.

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Notes

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- 2 A highly targeted audience rather than a large undifferentiated group of various types of consumers. With the proliferation of new media sources, such as magazines, television and radio channels, there is a greater capability of ensuring that the specific needs of interest groups are met (Brereton, 2001: 123).
- 3 A common term used to explain a broadcast programme which mixes light entertainment and information (Brereton, 2001: 89).
- 4 Richard Davis, *The Press and American Politics* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1996), 108-109.
- 5 See F. Leslie Smith, *Perspectives on Radio and Television* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985).
- 6 This definition derived from Wolfgang Donsbach, “Soft News,” unpublished paper, August 4, 1999, p. 1; McCartney, “News Lite,” p.21.
- 7 The entire news programme including the commercials.
- 8 Lack of seriousness.
- 9 The dramatic close-up depicts close personal distance or touching distance, the chest shot represents far personal distance, and the medium shot depicts close social distance (just beyond touching distance)—the distance at which we carry on impersonal business, as with salesperson (Jamieson and Campbell, 2001: 84).

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