Television News Channels and the Tamilnadu Bourgeoisie

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Abstract

The programming at all-news TV stations tends to be highly structured and formula-oriented. Sports news is broadcast at certain times, as are business news, weather reports, features, commentaries, local news, and network news—all have more or less regular time slots, so that viewers looking for certain kinds of news learn when to tune in to get whatever it is they are interested in. This paper deals with how can we explain the existence of TV stations that broadcast news 24 hours a day? All this news would result in incredible overkill or supersaturation of information, yet in many cities all news channels are quite profitable. In Tamilnadu most of the news TV station are owned by a bourgeoisie with background from political, business and other entities.

Key Words: Indian Televisison, News channels, Viewership, Marxism.

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News and Alienation

The survival of all news television stations, indicates a persistent “information hunger” that this kind of programming helps to satisfy our needs. But why this avidness for news? Why this need to keep on top of everything? It is a sign (or, to be more precise, semiotically speaking, a signifier) of a widespread and powerful affliction in Indian culture—an overpowering sense of anxiety and fear (the signified) that tears at the psyches of many people.

It also represents a desire to “participate” in history somehow, even if only vicariously. Psychoanalysts would describe this news hunger, as a neurosis, a compulsive form of behavior, even though it seems safe, fueled by relentless and powerful urges quite likely to be harmful. In extreme cases we may even suggest that “newsaholics” are people who know everything but do nothing—except listen to (or watch) the news. There may even be something of a desire to be like God in these people—all knowing, all-pervasive—except that the newsaholic is driven not by a sense of being all-powerful but by the reverse.

Ultimately, it would seem, the anxiety of the heavy news listener is the product of a sense of powerlessness and insignificance, which leads to a need for constant surveillance. From the Marxist perspective, this is quite understandable. Bourgeois capitalist societies generate alienation and a host of afflictions connected to it—a sense of powerlessness, insecurity, estrangement, rootlessness, and lack of identity. Because we have no coherent sense of history or ideology, and because we live in a society that may be described as dog eat dog, we must, if we are to survive, keep on top of things and never be caught napping.

Our capacity to absorb the enormous amounts of programming aired by all-news stations is tied to this anxiety and to something else (to continue the Marxist critique): What we are offered is not really news but essentially trivia-sensational “junk food for the mind” that does not deal seriously with our social and political problems but instead diverts and entertains us.

Because this so-called news is insubstantial, we are able to devour huge quantities of it and never get full. We lack a well-defined and coherent political sensibility that enables us to make sense of events. All we get, for the most part, is “figure” divorced from “ground”—that is, a succession of reports on things (fires, crimes, political events, film reviews, food tips, the weather) that all occupy the foreground. This “news” is all rapidly...
interesting and satisfies our curiosity, but it doesn't help us to orient ourselves, because nothing fits together with anything else. The pressure within the news media to cover events as they happen, to get the news first, prevents them from providing useful background information and thoughtful analysis. “To the blind, all things are sudden;” someone once said, and to those with no sense of history and social relations, with no understanding of the causes of events and their implications, all news stations are literally sensational. What we get may be fascinating, but it is not particularly edifying or useful to listeners who wish to uncover the meanings of events.

Frequently, media scholars distinguish between “hard” and “soft” news. Hard news is supposedly serious; it deals with important events in the social, political, and economic arenas. But many of the stories classified as hard news are really products of the public relations mills of political leaders, government agencies, businesses, and other organizations. News reporters are, as a rule, highly moral and responsible professionals who do the best they can to avoid being manipulated, to offer accurate information, and so forth, but they have, without recognizing it, adopted the establishment's point of view. Thus their ideas are, as Marxists would put it, “the ideas of the ruling class.”

NEWS AND RULING-CLASS IDEOLOGY

A study of televised news conducted in Great Britain reached some conclusions about the role of broadcasters in the presentation of ideology:

News talk occurs within a cultural framework which stresses balance and impartiality. Yet despite this, detailed analysis reveals that it consistently maintains and supports a cultural framework within which viewpoints favourable to the status quo are given preferred and privileged readings. This representation of events as news is not governed by a conscious attempt to present ideology. The journalists and producers and those they allow to broadcast of course believe that their routines and codes merely serve to fashion the news into intelligible and meaningful bulletins. (Glasgow University Media Group, 1980, p. 122).

The ideological assumptions newscasters make are all the more deceptive because neither the newscasters themselves nor their audiences generally recognize those assumptions for what they are. News professionals select the topics on which they focus their attention from a huge inventory of available information. Their selection of items for broadcast (along with their failure to provide audiences with background on those items) is crucial. What is neglected? What is not seen as worth dealing with? What is determined to have little news value? These are some questions we might ask as we consider the adequacy of the news diet available on all-news television stations. It is possible that some stories of possible significance are neglected or mentioned only in passing because of the unconscious assumptions of the news editors and audiences of these news programs, who have been taught over a number of years what is important and what isn't. Some issues, by their nature, are harder than others to uncover or more complicated to analyze; editors and reporters who face the pressures of limited time and production budgets often pass over such issues.

In the case of soft news—features of various kinds—an insidious commercialization is present, for soft-news stories almost always contain, as an end result, the promotion of some product or service.

We learn about “undiscovered” restaurants, interesting films, and the best boutiques in which to buy this or that kind of clothing. Ultimately, although these features may seem quite innocent, they serve as free advertisements for businesses. From a sociological perspective, the manifest functions of such features are to entertain and provide useful information; the latent function is to “sell” restaurants, movies, and all manner of other things. To the Marxist, hard news and soft news are more or less the same: Both help to support the ideological perspectives of the ruling classes and fuel the engines of consumption.

COMMERCIALS AND ANXIETY

The most important engines of consumption in radio broadcasting are the commercials; about 16 to 18 minutes of every hour—roughly one third of broadcast time is devoted to commercials. Thus one-third of the information broadcast on all-news stations is product news. When soft news is added to the mix, it is clear that a very large block of news airtime is actually given to commercial information. In addition, most of the
imagination, intelligence, and creativity found on TV and in popular culture in general—is lavished on commercials. This is because they are what is most important, which, after all, are businesses that exist to make money through the use of the public airwaves.

We are bombarded with slogans, jingles, and announcements that use whatever subliminal or other persuasive techniques are available to make us feel anxious about ourselves, to generate feelings of relative deprivation, and to get us to buy something. Ironically, to assuage our bad feelings, to rid ourselves of these anxieties about ourselves and our situations, we turn to the mass media—movies, soap operas, music, even all-news TV stations—which reinforce the very problems we hope they will help us solve. Thus we become caught in a vicious cycle from which there is no escape. The more we view the news (and the ubiquitous commercials that are part of TV news programming), the unhappier we become, and the unhappier we become, the more we view to the news.

When we view to all news tv stations, especially for long periods of time, we seldom can avoid ending up disturbed. We become anxious about the world and plagued by negative emotions. This may explain why, in certain circumstances, no news is good news. Small wonder that the average all-news tv station listener tunes in for only 20 or 30 minutes at a time.

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References


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