

Comments on

Ursula Rao's working paper „Re-writing politics. Consumerist messages and the emergence of a new style of political reporting in India”

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I found Ursula Rao's paper rich and thought provoking not only because it elaborates on an important issue of social knowledge production by press but also because it suggests new categories for the conceptualization of change in news production.

1. Style.

Ursula Rao is bringing the issue of style to the fore of the discussion of political reporting in press. I find it particularly interesting and useful, for the notion of style can be interpreted not only as an aesthetic category, but also as an important correlate of power relations in society. Here Pierre Bourdieu's notion of “judgment of taste” (1984) and its role in exercise of symbolic power can be of use, as well as Steven Lukes's model of three faces of power (1974).

I am wondering to what extent references to style in journalists' discourse (in a sense that something “has a style” as a positive evaluation, is “in good style”, or “stylish”) serves as a mechanism of exercising domination, e.g. in attempts of promote and naturalize one type of vision of social reality (which could be also embedded in a different set of material resources) over the other. The juxtaposition of vernacular vs. English language press comes to mind here. As Ursula Rao mentioned elsewhere “vernacular journalism [...] has to fight against an image of being biased, local and of low standard (2005: 35). Similarly, Per Stahlberg points that categorizing both in terms of vernacular vs. English as well as regional vs. national “has hierarchical connotations” (2002: 33). I am wondering to what extent the distinction between “witty”, “new”, “modern” vs. “old” style in Ursula's research material is a part of competition between English language press, which tries to keep its position, and dynamically developing vernacular press that (to an extent) challenges this position. To what extent is it centre vs. periphery divide and/or competition?

I apologize if I have misinterpreted the selection of quotations, but it seems that mostly English language newspapers - *Times of India* (and *Hindustanian Times*) in particular - were active in spinning the metaphor (or figure) of “forgetful chief minister”. The vernacular newspaper *Dainik Jagaran* also used the metaphor but in the context of giving a face-saving opportunity to the CM in an interview where he had a chance to restore his reputation and impose his own interpretation of the meaning of the attack. Perhaps this is just a coincidence, but a more general issue I would like to raise is the competition among the newspapers and different type of those: does it involve different strategies of news production?

The argument of the consumerisation and aesthetization of press news triggers further questions about the relationship (and competition) of press with news production in electronic media in India, which, as some argue (Kishan Thussu 2007) undergo “murdochization”. The issue of the scope of literacy in the population seems to be crucial in this context: while it certainly broadened, I have read that one third of the population remains illiterate (correct me if I am wrong).

## 2. Creativity.

Connected with the issue of style is a concept of “creativity”, which Ursula Rao attributes to a particular (neoliberal?) ideology of news production. Being a part of the narrative of success (e.g. in organizational context) the concept of creativity is extremely self-limiting for the creativity is strictly channeled within the framework of ideology (i.e. it channels the innovation along the lines acceptable for ideology). The question here is to what extent this type of creativity has a potential of encouraging civic participation, or rather spins “spiral of cynicism” (Capella, Jamieson 1997)? Moreover, would Ursula agree that creativity, despite being perceived as an attribute of an individual, might imply group (collective) effort in a sense that the articles are a joint product of journalists and editors?

## 3. Discursive events.

Yet another valuable point Ursula Rao makes is a conceptualization of an article as an event. When compared to Boorstin’s weathered term of pseudo-events, reporting of new quality is less dependant on politicians (who were the key producers of pseudo-events). These events are also not quite like media events of Dayan and Katz (1992) for they are not so much aimed at reproduction of social order and celebrating community through viewing/listening to media event. In the articles that are events journalists are the main producers as well as heroes of what I call *discursive* events that primarily rely on self-quoting (e.g. as in the example of article that shows politicians talking as villains – the journalists received the quotations from her colleagues-journalists), spinning of the news within the same and related media and promoting journalists as political personalities.

## 4. Representations of politics.

In the paper the two types of the representations of politics are juxtaposed: the “traditional” one (or modern) based on the vision of the state as a key guarantor of common good and the new one (or postmodern, alternatively: neoliberal) where the state is treated as an impediment to free market and citizens’ subjectivity. Ursula Rao accounts for the fact that journalists’ political reporting introduces organizational/market logic in the sphere of politics, e.g. by constructing representations of a typical (or atypical) career paths of a politician (e.g. the 20 year break from one’s career is unacceptable either in job market or politics). Age is a key disqualifying factors in neoliberal discourse, in Poland still the job advertisements often set the age limit for the majority of job positions (e.g. “not older than 35”). The ridicule of senility seems to be a correlate of the same ideology.

Interestingly however, the “creativity” of journalistic work also reveals itself in the selective treatment of different elements of “traditional” discourse. In the quoted fragment of the article (*Times of India*, 24.01.2000) the journalist ridicules senility, but does not attack the manifestation of “dynastic” characteristics of democratic representatives. The fact that both the father and the son were high rank politicians is not criticized and treated as a matter of fact. (I realize that political dynasties could be an integral part of (traditional) political culture\*, yet, one might have argued that old age (traditionally) associated with wisdom etc. could also be left out of criticism for the same reason.)

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\* Compare: Michael Herzfeld argues that thanks to anthropologists a one-dimensional conceptualization of democratic politics was put under scrutiny by means of: “showing how dynasties of representatives are established and are reproduced even within a democratic ethos and structure, in accordance with a logic which does not always tally with a superficial view of democratic systems as transcending the social and the cultural” (2001: 125).

I am wondering if Ursula came across the criticism of the dynastic and not based on merit and professionalism access to politics. If there were such attacks, it would just demonstrate the arbitrariness of the journalistic invention, on the one hand, as well as the thoroughness of change from traditional to new discourse on the other.

Lastly, as far as two visions of politics are concerned, I am wondering what are the consequences of the ridicule of old age for democratic participation.

#### 5. Strategies of argumentation.

Herbert Marcuse argued that a new characteristic of political discourse in industrial societies is that politician's features of character, skills and expertise, professional experience and appearance are treated as attributes of the same order (1992 [1964]). In the working paper the conflation between the attributes of senility and political non-performance is shown. In this perspective efficiency (of the government) is rather a correlate of looks/appearances of being professional than professionalism itself. The creation of the image goes to the forefront of politics. In the case of press political reporting – where the creation of image is predominantly verbally, despite the fact graphic images play an increasingly prominent role – it might be worthwhile to pay closer attention to language. The achievements of discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis in particular (e.g. Wodak, Meyer 2002), can serve in interpreting the texts in more detail, paying attention to the ways in which the representations of politicians/politics are created discursively, and where the lines of manipulations and falsification run. I am wondering, however, how deep anthropologist is allowed to go into text leaving the social context and practices that brought the text to life aside. Finding a balance between textual analysis and ethnography is very important in the study of press production (as well as in other fields, e.g. anthropology of policy).

#### 6. Professional and political practices.

In the working paper the relations of journalists with the sources of information (i.e. politicians); the influence of politicians on news agenda, the benefits of the rivals from attacks of the press; the influence of politicians on reporting are backgrounded. Yet these relations seem to be an important part of journalistic practices. Revealing some of them would allow answering a question if the political field undergoes consumerization alongside the journalistic field. Politicians more frequently and more professionally rely on PR techniques in order to boost their public image. They attempt to reach their goals through media. Is it true about Indian newspapers that that their political preferences are identifiable?<sup>†</sup>

The paper demonstrates that stakes within the journalistic field (e.g. courage, criticizing a politician, independence) is form of augmenting ones' symbolic capital within this field. Yet another important issue on professional practices is the degree of autonomy of the field. The quotation from Ursula's correspondence with a journalist brilliantly shows the dependence of journalists on advertising people. What seems to be interesting to trace is to what extent powerful role of marketing departments in the processes of agenda setting is a part of PUBLIC discourse? In other words, do journalists themselves bring this issue up in their texts, e.g. writing about rival newspapers? The public presence of this knowledge – and little concern with it – could support Ursula's argument by demonstrating the trivialization of one type of dependency (i.e. dependency on market) alongside stigmatization of the other one (i.e. dependency on the state/politicians).

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<sup>†</sup> Compare: Michael Schudson (2005) put forward a thesis that partisan press is more accountable than non-partisan one, i.e. that while politicians undergo democratic control through the elections, journalists cannot be controlled by democratic means.

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