

EASA Media Anthropology Network  
E-Seminars Series

<http://www.media-anthropology.net/workingpapers.htm>

E-Seminar on Ursula Rao's working paper  
**“Re-writing Politics: Consumerist messages and the  
emergence of a new style of political reporting in India”**

20 November – 4 December 2007

**John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)**

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Dear All,

Welcome to the 21st EASA media anthropology network e-seminar. Over the next fortnight, until Tuesday 4 December at 9 pm GMT, we shall be discussing a working paper by Ursula Rao entitled "Re-writing Politics: Consumerist messages and the emergence of a new style of political reporting in India". A copy of this paper is available at <http://www.media-anthropology.net/workingpapers.htm>

Ursula Rao is a senior lecturer at the School of Social Sciences and International Studies, University of New South Wales, in Sydney. She received her PhD in anthropology at the University of Heidelberg and "Habilitation" at the University of Halle. Specialising in contemporary urban Hinduism in India, she has published extensively on ritual as performance. Her other main area of research is journalistic practices, particularly changing approaches to news making among English- and Hindi-language journalists in India. Her book *News Cultures: Journalistic Practices and the Remaking of Indian Society* (Oxford: Berghahn) is forthcoming.

The discussant will be Anna Horolets, PhD, who is a lecturer in political anthropology and communication studies at the Warsaw School of Social Psychology (SWPS). Her research interests centre on discourse analysis, the anthropology of media and the symbolic politics and cultural dimensions of European integration – see, most recently, Horolets, A. 2007. *Media and politics in transitional Poland: symbiosis or adversary relations?*, In B. Sanghera et al (eds.), *Theorising Social Change in Post-Socialist Countries*. Bern: Peter Lang.

As Anna will not be posting her comments until later today, there is still time to read the paper for those of you who haven't yet had the chance to do so. Anna's comments will be followed by a response from Ursula after which the discussion will be open to all on the list (the more the merrier). To post your brief comments or queries please write directly to the list at [medianthro@easaonline.org](mailto:medianthro@easaonline.org) after we have had Ursula's response.

Looking forward to a fruitful dialogue, I hand over now to Anna Horolets.

Best wishes,

John

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**Anna Horolets (Warsaw School of Social Psychology)**

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Comments on

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

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<sup>1</sup>, yet, one might have argued that old age (traditionally) associated with wisdom etc. could also be left out of criticism for the same reason.)

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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).

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 their political preferences are identifiable?<sup>2</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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Dayan Daniel and Elihu Katz. 1992. *Media Events. The Live Broadcasting of History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

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<sup>2</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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**Ursula Rao (University of New South Wales, Sydney)**

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Dear List,

Dear Anna, thank you a lot for your elaborate and very thought provoking comments. They certainly made be rethink a number of things. I wish to take this opportunity to reply to some of the comments, which I think raise important issues for debate.

Style

Your suggestion to push interpretation more in terms of understanding 'style' as a tool for power contests (rather than as an aesthetic category) is extremely helpful. I think this is an important theoretical issue, which I would need to reflect on much more.

At this point I can say that style is a major issue for English language papers. It is the way they try to gain an advantage and also cater to young people. This is in complete contrast to Hindi language papers, which are boring to read. They use redundant phrases and many Hindi reporters seem to have only limited writing abilities (and the management seems to invest little in language skills of their employees). English language papers emphasise 'good' writing. However, the use of language is NOT a means of 'distinction' in Bourdieu's sense. The opposite is true. They try to become popular, because they wish to reach across the language divide, to attract traditional Hindi language readers. It is about walking the line, between popular and high class, writing in the English language and yet being understood by the 'masses', offer analysis and make for enjoyable reading.

(Hindi papers also try to reach across the so called language divide. They do this by offering more local news, working towards greater credibility in political reporting).

## Murdochization

The term seems helpful and I will look at Kisan Thussu's paper. I think the issue here is to find a balance between getting the Indian context right, while not over exaggerating its uniqueness. Thus, I think not only electronic media in India, but global news discourse needs to be brought into the picture. I would be more than happy if anyone could suggest literature for comparison.

## Creativity

I used this term to emphasize that it is not all about conformity and being overwhelmed by a dominant discourse. Journalists are rewarded when they come up with a text that surprises. I think in that sense their job is similar to ours as social scientists. I obviously do not mean to say that they are free individuals inventing new perspectives. But I do think that they try to push boundaries and go beyond established narratives, creating cracks in the wall. And I think they are encouraged to do it (if it does not offend financiers).

## Tradition and Modernity

I think that reinventing political writing is not about discarding everything that is classified as "tradition" in favour of qualities identified as "modern". In fact I do not think that this dichotomy helps at all. The process I am describing is one of reinventing tradition to be "modern". Today new models provide the direction for this change. Modernity is no longer represented by politicians (like it used to be, e.g. when Nehru was PM). Now other actors from the corporate sector, the media, the arts are those who embody modernity (as an icon, an ideology). Politicians are judged in relation to the performance of those other public actors. So it is not about abandoning tradition, but about reinventing modernity. Modernity (that is really modern) is no longer socialist modernity, but a new global modernity. Politicians just don't seem to embody that, while actors certainly do (this is reinforced by the fact that politicians seem to regularly make a fool of themselves when they go overseas, while media people and business people do not).

I also argue that politicians lack behind because they do not (yet / successfully) use PR as a means to manipulate news, create an image. They do influence news by pulling strings. However, the corporate sector has a financial advantage AND has embraced spin.

## Discourse analysis

Anna brought up the issue of language. I think the question is not whether we as anthropologists are allowed to offer discourse analysis. My background just does not make me very confident about doing that. I do think that the analysis of the social context in itself adds something highly valuable. However, I am worried I might not have given enough thick description in this paper and instead focussed too much on text, thus failing both side, the analysis of social context and of discourse.

Best,

Ursula

**John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)**  
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Dear All,

Thanking Anna and Ursula for their opening contributions, the discussion is now open to everyone on the list. Please post your brief comments and questions directly to [medianthro@easaonline.org](mailto:medianthro@easaonline.org)

Many thanks,

John

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**Francisco Osorio (University of Manchester)**  
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Dear List,

I would like to ask Ursula about the distinction tradition / modern and its relationship to journalism. It seems to me that anthropologists used to claim that powerful states such as India and China built national identity through the mass media, being newspapers a key media. I wonder, in Ursula's proposal, if this has changed or, if it is changing.

Journalism, therefore, could be better understood according to Schudson's proposal of news as stories (2005:122), in the sense that journalists could be written not for the State and maybe not even for infotainment, but for something else. Here is a quote that could help to highlight the point: "One reporter says that she wants stories that will make a man reading the front page at the breakfast table spit out his coffee and declare, 'My God, Martha, did you see this?' Media analysts have called these 'what-a-story', while Bob Woodward at the Washington Post has advised the reporters he supervises to go after 'Holy shit!' stories".

Reference

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**Alberto Sánchez (University of California, Berkeley)**  
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Dear Ursula and Other Participants,

I was also struck by how much the problem you are tackling is about style. It is an issue that is also at the center of my research among writers in Mexico City. In a fictionalized book written in 1967 about a literary group that certain prominent Mexican writers belonged to (including Carlos Fuentes) Luis Guillermo Piazza (also part of the group) wrote the following reflections of what writers should (now) strive for in their writing:

- 1) coolness, no sentimentalism
- 2) be catholic, universal
- 3) movement, like in the movies
- 4) use a temporality, also like in the movies, we will see each other, let's see, who knows
- 5) distrust words, be critical of almost everything

He goes on to write about how paragraphs should be short, chapters of books should be on various subjects, brief collages, because that is what people read. In the 1980s there was a debate between two literary magazines about what made good literature. One magazine argued for accessible prose. They were motivated by a leftist commitment to literacy and democracy. Today the writing even in the other more elitist journal is catchy and accessible although it continues to pitch itself to a niche market.

I think you are right: one of the fundamental issues is a shift of terrain from politics to the market. Good writing, or good journalism, will never be exactly what the market dictates, but what has changed, is that the market has become a strong point of gravitation in a field that used to be dominated by political concerns. There is, as you write, a consumer ethic that pervades decisions and judgments, even when advertising dollars and the bottom line are really not even at stake.

In *Remediation: Understanding new media*, Bolter and Grusin (1999) write about how each medium appropriates the virtues of the others in order to compete. They show, for example, how the Internet “remediated” the newspaper and how newspapers now “remediate” web pages in their battle for readers (viewers, consumers). I happened to notice that the *Times of India* have an online edition. In my research I principally focus on magazines, even on what I am calling the magazinification of writing. You write about how the stories that you are concerned with precipitate the news as much as react to it. Could this not be a result of newspaper stories becoming more like web content or magazine articles? The front page story of the newspaper that I receive here in Montreal is always more of a magazine article concerning issues such as the fashion of authenticity, or the rising cost of secondary education, and never concerning a political, military, or economic event.

Hope that something here is helpful for you. I really enjoyed your paper and am looking forward to the ensuing discussion.

Alberto Sánchez

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**Ursula Rao (University of New South Wales, Sydney)**  
[u.rao@unsw.edu.au](mailto:u.rao@unsw.edu.au)

Dear all,

Thank you Francisco for your intervention. I am still struggling to see the connection between your two suggestions: that newspapers are important for building national identity and that journalists write for “the story”. Both things could be true. They strike me as being two different perspectives, which are not exclusive but complementary. With regard to national identity and newspapers: my contention is that public performances are central for creating

national identity in India, and much more important than the written word. However, with a growing media market, there are more and more intersections between mass media and public performances, both amalgam to create a highly effective (politicized) public. And yes, journalists write to get THE STORY. They want to be noticed, become as famous as those whom they write about. And maybe the connection between these two things is important. Journalists obviously could not be bothered (nor do they know) the long term effects of their day to day writing. However, the efforts they make to be different, to be noticed, to become famous, has ramifications for the way the political sphere is imaged and constructed. It is this connection that interests me.

Alberto, I like your term “magazinification”. It pinpoints exactly what is happening. Till date the main newspaper is still very much focused on politics (and crime) (other themes are to a great extent confined to supplements), however politics can now be re-written in the style of magazine articles. The claim is, it is still as serious, but more enjoyable to read. The danger I see with a term like “magazinification” is that it is rather imprecise. The ‘new’ style in political writing I am talking about does not include writing about politicians’ private life, or making them look glamorous. It is more news as gossip and gossip as something that is thought to reveal the ‘real thing’ behind the polished image.

Ursula

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**Per Ståhlberg (Stockholm University)**

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Dear Ursula and other participants,

I am perhaps a bit biased, sharing with Ursula a fascination in Lucknow journalists, but to me her paper was highly interesting and her two case studies made a lot of sense. While I was doing my study of journalists in Lucknow a few years before Ursula, newspapers in the city had rather recently gone through a lot of changes (Ståhlberg 2002).

They were printing in colour, had improved their layout and were constantly experimenting with new genres of writing (local news, business and various kinds of feature sections and supplements). Several new dailies had started up editions in Lucknow and the competition among almost a dozen newspapers (in 1997) was very tough. Editors were trying hard to attract new categories of readers (they talked about women, kids, newly literate). All believed that a newspaper had to change in order to be successful.

Political news, however, was not the primary object of change in this race for higher sales. “We all have more or less the same political news, we can’t compete with that”, I was told by several editors. Political news was still the backbone in these papers, and politics the most prestigious beat. But it was routine news and reporters hardly felt any pressure to change their style of writing. Occasionally, there was of course, someone who wrote something unexpected. In my book I relate an incident when a reporter on a Hindi daily defamed an unmarried female politician by relating a rumour about her “illicit daughter”. That article started up a very inflamed debate about the ethics of journalism. Finally, even the owner of the paper had to excuse the article because it had crossed the boundary from the public into the private.

The reaction on those two stories that Ursula Rao is presenting in her paper seem to be radically different. And I think she is very right in pointing out that there is a new style of political reporting emerging in the Indian press. It is also quite reasonable that she sees this transformation as a result of a declining political patronage. The media has new masters.

What I am lacking in Ursula's paper is, however, some discussion about the broader media context of newspaper journalism today. If there was a newspaper revolution in the early 1990's, there seem to be a TV-news revolution going on in India right now. An amazing number of 24-hour news channels are since the last few years available, at least in Delhi (I don't know about Lucknow) and they all present political news as entertainment. Ursula's case studies are from year 2000, so at that time this development had barely started. But, are they early signs of something that is much more profound now?

Another thing that I wonder is what is happening with the professional roles among the journalists. When I did my study, the Hindi- and English language journalists usually explained their importance in relation to Indian democracy in clearly divergent ways. The Hindi press claimed that it was "closer to the people" and the English press that it was "more serious and credible." How does the new style of political news influence the professional role among the English language journalists? Is perhaps the split between the presses in the two languages about to diminish because they are both more obviously commercial?

Regards,

Per Ståhlberg

Reference:

Ståhlberg, Per. 2002. *Lucknow Daily. How a Hindi Newspaper Constructs Society*. Stockholm: Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology.

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**John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)**  
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Dear Ursula,

I was wondering if you could elaborate on the point you make in response to Anna Horolets about not having provided enough 'thick description' in the paper. I am intrigued by how in the abstract you describe contemporary Indian newspapers as 'instruments for the practice of democracy', although you don't seem to follow this through in the paper. What would a thick description of such instrumentality entail? And can Indian 'democracy' be really described as a single (field of) practice?

Many thanks,

John

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**Daniel Taghioff (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London)**  
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Dear Ursula,

Thanks for a great paper.

I want to pick up a few issues, I wish I could do this more justice, but fieldwork in India has left me with sporadic internet access. Similarly apologies for any repetition in here.

John is pointing out an interesting issue, that sort of serves as an umbrella for the concerns that I have been mulling over since reading your paper last week.

1) Style – is there an association between style and content: Do journalists with certain styles tend to focus on certain issues. You seem to bring this out in terms of the angle taken with the politicians, but are there other issues of shifts in editorial focus that inform or disturb your narrative about commercialization?

2) There is the issue of public sphericules (Todd Gittlin), particularly in the proliferation of vernacular media. Do you spot gaps by language press, in terms of style, and does that relate to content / editorial focus?

3) One striking aspect of Indian democracy in practice is the disjuncture between local issues (i.e. Panchayat Politics) and State and Federal politics. Is there any reflection of this in the media?

It is interesting to note that the Hindu edition here in the Nilgiris has a lot of very local news despite being a national paper, so how does regionalisation play into the issue of various publics?

I ask these questions because your paper does such a brave job of weaving together issues of subjectivity, style and epistemology with social shifts.

Do you see this shift in subjectivity reflected in other walks of life? I saw an article in the Hindu about instrumental versus liberal / critical education for instance, which was suggestive of wider social shifts.

Is this part of a country opening up to the world, of a ruling class pulling away from the rest, or is there a more complex differentiation going on? (Or is this part of some sort of integrating populism, I think not, but it would be interesting to explore).

I for one would like to hear a lot more, your piece is very suggestive of how social changes are taking place, and also implicates media scholars (with our critical position which seems linked to ideas of liberalization) as a part of such changes.

Daniel

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**Erkan Saka (Rice University and Istanbul Bilgi University)**

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Dear Ursula,

I am inevitably drawn to make comparisons between my fieldwork in Turkey and yours. Here are some ideas, questions and notes:

1a) Maybe because of some major differences in the way politics work in India and Turkey, I seem to observe a different development despite the same 1980's turn in economic policies.

In India in parallel economic policy changes, in parallel to novelties in news writing, attacking politicians began. As I understand, journalists used to refrain from attacking as the political authority would prevent major sources of income.

However, could we think of a politically homogenous mass media in terms of politics? I mean when most of the journalists were pro *status quo*, others would be against.

1b) This was what happened in Turkey: Even under the worst conditions some Turkish journalists were oppositional and when the party they supported rose to power, then the others began to be oppositional... So the press could always be a nuisance. In fact, only after 1980's, with the neoliberal openings in Turkish economy, Turkish press would become less oppositional in general. Media conglomeration, rise of new economic elites went hand in hand with policy changes, and the proprietors had become more determined to stop journalists critical of the political authorities because of their own economic interests. The key issue is although politicians seem to have lost power in some degrees, they are still the key actors shaping the new economy and although they seem to play not an active role, they still occupy the decision posts: crediting, taxation, licensing, making related legislation....

2) I argue with John Postill, who asks you more to elaborate on discourse of democracy in the new news writing practices. When I read the abstract, I was too excited to see what is to come in the main text as the discourse of democracy abounds in Turkish press, too. There are both similarities and contrasts in Turkish and Indian cases but at least there is the fact that the government and the pro-government press, which are vanguards of further liberalization of economy and also the leaders in democracy discourse.

3) "Newspapers have not been marginalized by electronic media (1)," how do they do that? I wonder if they have begun to exploit the virtues of new media tools and new veins of advertising as Turkish newspaper began to do that and their sites become the most visited websites in Turkey...

4) When you state "infotainment; how to make routine news interesting," my first reaction was, is this really new? Then in one of your responses in the mailing list you make a distinction – at least what I understand – between this news practice and the traditional tabloid style. However, you may still elaborate on this distinction or maybe you should describe the media scene in India more. The last point depends on again my own observations. The Turkish newspapers, as I know, could never be classified as quality press and tabloid press. Most of the relatively "serious" newspapers, i.e. *Hürriyet*, always had tabloid features. (I guess *Cumhuriyet* could be the only steady example of a "New York Times style journalism", but it sure does not have that weight in Turkish press anymore). So are you stating that in the

beginning, there was at least a basic distinction between quality press and tabloids in India like in US and many European countries?

5) But as Daniel states your hints on style are exciting. Related to my points at 4, I would like to see more on the production of this new news writing style that still claims to be different from the tabloid news writing and claims to contribute quality political news reporting.

Erkan Saka

My Field diary: <http://erkansaka.net>

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**Alberto Sánchez (University of California, Berkeley)**  
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Thank you for responding Ursula. You are right, magazinification is much too imprecise. But perhaps we can still elaborate on the change in tone and style. In my own work, the style I am interested in can be described as more confident and uninhibited. It arises from a privileging of shorter sentences, straightforward and “clear” arguments, and the use of word-images when possible. It is critical of politicians and politics in general, concentrates more on their personality than their track records, but at the same time is upbeat about things that we might identify as being part of a consumer-based lifestyle (critical of US foreign policy, perhaps, but not of “the American way of life”). I would be interested to know if this resonates with what you are arguing concerning the journalistic changes you write about.

And in mentioning magazines and remediation in my earlier comment, I wanted to stress the way that media needs media and appropriates other media in order to compete for consumers. I think this is what Per was getting at with his comment concerning the new wave of news programming on television in India. What is happening with the print edition of the Times of India surely cannot be disassociated very easily from a more generalized phenomenon.

Since reading your article I have spent some time browsing the electronic version of *The Times of India*. Perhaps it was not up and running when you did your research and at any rate to deal with it would have exceeded the scope of your article which I found more than sufficient in itself. But in reading your article, I became curious about how the electronic version of *The Times of India* relates, today, to the print version. Just to give one example, the electronic version allows me to give “real time” feedback to the editors, contributors, as well as other readers. I can read the “most read,” “most emailed,” and “most commented on” news articles by simply selecting a tab, or read the comments made by other readers at the end of any article. It strikes me that increasingly it is not just a gut feeling that editors and writers are going on when they select the tone, style, and content that might make a new story “pop”.

And finally I have a comment with respect to your response to Francisco. Angel Rama in his book *The Lettered City* has famously made the argument that it is erroneous to judge the importance of those who write by the number of people that read what they write. At least in Latin America, since the time of the colonies, writers have always been closely associated with power. Priests positioned themselves as interpreters of sacred texts, literate authorities of the will of the crown, and hundred of other “men of letters” of metropolitan thought, progress, reason, and modernity. It is only in the twentieth century that literacy has spread enough that there exists for the first time a significant number of people that can read and write that are

outside the inner circles of power. But even with this new development, I think Rama is right in arguing that writing still is a crucial site for developing new ideologies, for legitimizing power. In the end, it is perhaps not as important that these legitimizing elaborations are read, those of state-nationalism included, as it is that they have been printed and are being circulated (and here I would imagine that English would be a better language to print them in than Hindi from the point of view of power in India). Do you think that it would be legitimate to say that the journalists you study, in being light on capitalism and heavy on politicians, might be responding to a much more fundamental shift in the development of power?

Thank you again for a wonderful provocative article and for fielding our comments and questions.

Alberto Sánchez

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**Ursula Rao (University of New South Wales, Sydney)**

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Dear all,

Thank you all for your comments. This discussion is certainly gaining speed and it inspires me a great deal. I will not be able to comment on everything today itself, but I want to make a start and then catch up on some of the more difficult questions in the next couple of days.

Practice is indeed what my work is about and I fully embrace John's critical remark that there is not one practice of democracy in India. My intention was to say that news making contributes significantly to what one could call 'practicing democracy' in India. There are a number of angles to that. There is reporters' struggle to understand and frame political practices in new ways as a means to critique the system and its 'structures' (and not just individual politicians). However, there is also a more popular angle to it.

Several comments asked me to elaborate on vernacular news making and whether it is in line with or in contrast to features of news making in the English language press. One striking difference is that vernacular newspapers are open to issues local citizens raise. Hindi newspapers print just about anything anyone wants to see published. I have called their approach 'open-door-policy.' People use the opportunity for publicity to criticise the government, draw attention to local problems or turn the newspaper into a stepping stone for a political career. Thus, Hindi newspapers are an important platform for residents (readers) as well as the vernacular elite (as also Rajagopal has pointed out). English language papers stay away from these kinds of local news. However, as Alberto pointed out, they have their own way of interacting with the readership. They collect feedback by encouraging readers to send emails (they do this not only in the online editions but also in the printed newspapers). This way they get feedback from the people they care about, they are upper class, educated, young. Their feedback does indeed influence news making. I would say first and foremost it influences which themes newspapers write about. However, it also creates competition over popularity. Journalists' work is no longer evaluated only by their editors, but through an emerging "ranking culture," who gets maximum responses.

Taking into consideration all these different angles of news making, the dichotomy of power and resistance failed me. Are newspapers with or against the government, are they driven by

political interests or critical of the *status quo*, are they market driven and commerce oriented or instruments of the poor to draw attention to their problems? They seem to be doing a bit of all of that. (And I think that in a way all newspapers do a bit of all of that, even if in different ways.). I think we need to go beyond standard labels, which turn newspapers into powerful tool for manipulation or spaces for public debate. I struggle to find more complex ways of conceptualizing the power and agency of news and engagement with news. Newspapers do perpetuate structures, however they also try out perspectives that brake taken for granted assumptions. They do this by participating in a writing culture that is indeed elitist, as Alberto has pointed out. However, they embrace theories of different elites (political, economic, academic, religious (?)). And in the end they do all this just to sell more copies. Processes and effects are contradictory. And the challenge is to capture this without writing simply about a cacophony of voices. In terms of theory, I think, we need to move beyond dichotomies of continuity and change, structure and agency, power and resistance to conceptualise how news is positioned in society.

(So yes, Daniel, there are stories that disturb the narrative of commercialisation.)

I do agree that an understanding of the social position of newspapers can not do without the greater media context. Robin Jeffrey made an observation that I think still holds true, (also today with all these changes going on). Electronic media have created a craze for news (and a greater interest in politics), which also feeds the newspaper market. Newspapers have become more popular because they give something provided by electronic media but in a different context (you can read them at work, in a shop, in a riksha!!) and with different information. To secure their markets also in the future, all newspapers (also the Hindi newspaper I worked with) have an internet edition. They still run at a loss (at least they did in 2000), but they are thought to be the platform of the future and a must for all newspapers that hope to survive in the increasingly competitive media market. (Back to style: I think lighter language, funny stories, a lot of visuals, are some of the means by which newspaper try to live up to standards set by electronic media).

There are so many other issues, I shall think about them a bit more and get back later.

Ursula

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**Anna Horolets (Warsaw School of Social Psychology)**

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Dear Ursula and List,

Ursula's recent comment on the difference between English and vernacular press made me think about a particular opposition in Poland (and here I am following Erkan's example trying to understand through comparison).

There is a phenomenon of Radio Maryja in Poland, which is run by one priest from Redemptorist Order of Roman Catholic Church (he is a kind of celebrity). In the country of 38 million their audience is estimated at about 2 million (the estimates vary), and it occupies 5th position in the country (only 4 other radios have more listeners, and two of them are public). It's average listener is about 60 years old.

It's a Catholic radio and there are constant controversies about its political opinion programs, its intolerance etc. However, I did not want to talk about them but about the radio's "recipe"

for public participation, which seems to use a very similar mechanism to vernacular press in India in one respect.

They grant relatively much time to programs where listeners can phone and talk on air about whatever they wish to. In terms of “quality” the end-product is of rather “low” quality: these programs are quite boring for a listener who is used to quick paced programs with well written scripts. But listeners of this station are particularly valuing this feature and voice their appreciation “that someone finally listens to them” [I also heard it in everyday conversation e.g. at my local shop].

The case of this radio is quite complex because surely it works not only on the basis of some unique media solution but also relies on faith/religiosity of its listeners and a particular role of Catholic Church in Poland. I do not want to claim a full description of all its aspects, but just pay attention to the aspect of participation. There is an opinion [e.g. in some media debates] that this radio opened “public sphere” for elderly religious people who – after the systemic transformation of 1989 – were largely seen as an unnecessary ballast in the emerging liberal democratic system. In terms of democratic engagement it would mean a certain re-definition of a citizen – the broadening this category also onto the group of people around and over 60. The radio is capable not only to attract these people to listening but also mobilize them for various civic activities (many of the listeners are at the same times volunteers of the radio and members of “Family of Radio Maryja” organization). Here I use “civic” in a broad sense: an individual voluntarily participates and uses private resources in doing something for public (broader collectivity) aim. (I deliberately leave aside the content of their activity, e.g. pro-life marches etc).

I am wondering if the readers of Indian vernacular press are also sometimes mobilized for civic activity in some ways by the press.

Apologise for the lengthy description.

Best,

Anna Horolets

PS: if some of the Listers conducts or knows any anthropological work on Radio Maryja I would be grateful for the information.

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**Ursula Rao (University of New South Wales, Sydney)**

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Thank you Anna for this comment. Just a quick remark on this. I am not sure about Radio Maryja, but what the Hindi press offers is substantially different from what they here call ‘talk back radio.’ This a very polemic programs at where journalist tries to elicit inflammatory comments, want people to talk about their frustration.

In defence of the Hindi press, they do edit what comes in. They do not allow anything that looks too polemic or racist. However, it is interesting to see how they judge, when is a piece too nationalistic, too Hindu fundamentalist? – This is certainly not straight forward (a constant battle to become quality press, and be popular and cater to the readers).

Ursula

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**Kerstin B. Andersson (University of Gothenburg)**

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Dear Ursula and the list,

Nice paper, I encountered similar things in the Kolkata press in 2000-2001.

Some brief comments on your paper:

- Government controlled media up to the beginning or the nineties? My Kolkata experiences are more in line with radio, TV (*All India Radio, Doordarshan*) government controlled with the aim of creating a national identity while the printed media often functioned as forums for critical discussions, political debates and diverging points of views. I'm not too familiar with Hindi speaking areas but in the Bengali context printed media has fulfilled this function since the 19th century.

- Changes, new journalistic style? I sometimes feel a bit confused about what it is that changes. You point out a new style of writing and presenting political news, re-contextualising routine news, add own views, gossip etc. you also state that this article ("event") "coined a phrase and set and agenda."

First of all I'm wondering if the outreach of the by-line "the forgetful minister" is due to the style that the article was written in or if it is related to new forms and means of transmission of news. My experience is rather that this kind of "events" are closely related to the synergies that might appear in interaction with other media forms as TV, electronic media and so on. Secondly, is this a new way of presenting news? The ways that you describe it seems to me to be quite closely related to forms for transmission of news in the oral tradition, bards, storytellers, word of mouth etc.

- You relate the transformations to the economic opening up in the beginning of the nineties. I think that this is a rather wide statement. I would like to see a more precise description of the factors that have been instrumental in this transformation and also the implications that they have had.

- You state that you "discuss news texts with reference to the social environment that creates a particular perspective and thus gives political acts their meaning" and you touch on for example vernacular and English press. I think that the point on "social environment" should be further developed to include the audience and target groups. I think issues as to whom, why and how this message is conveying a political meaning is of significance.

Thanks again for a nice paper!

Kerstin

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**Ursula Rao (University of New South Wales, Sydney)**

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Dear all,

Kerstin's critical remarks point out a number of contexts that if added could make the

transition look much more complicated, less straight forward and thus more in line with the fuzziness of everyday live. (This I guess is now the demand for ‘thick description’ not about journalist writing or interviewing, but for more details about the contexts that inform the change). Let me try some short answers.

Government controls media: I never meant to say that. They did not. The government did not own any papers. And Kerstin rightly says that there was always much room for critical debate. In fact, the newspaper boom after 1979 (when censorship was lifted) is attributed to the fact that people were longing for critical information. However, politicians did have a structural advantage, which they no longer hold, or defiantly share with others who are doing a much better job in influencing the press, not by owning it but by ‘subsidizing’ the production (means advertising)

News writing styles: I am intrigued by Kerstin’s connection with traditional story telling. I was thinking more in terms of a process of tabloidization. But even such a term calls for explanation. From where do journalists draw inspiration? What are the narrative traditions available that can be refigured in a news context? (Need to think more).

Economic boom: I think the relation is pretty much straight forward. The economic boom that followed the economic reforms in 1990s created for the first time in India a vivid and rapidly growing advertising market. Newspapers no longer struggle to be profitable, they become money making machines (at least the English language papers). There are also a few other things. The import of technology – possible after 1990s – transformed printing and distribution. High quality colour print has become a standard today and newspapers are delivered timely. No long travels across dirty roads on overloaded lorries. The data is send through email to various substations in the country, printed locally, to be distributed locally. For those who are old enough to remember the old day, it is a fantastic new world.

Audience. One can’t do everything in one study. Mark Peterson has done some very interesting work on reading newspapers in India. My work focuses only on two aspects of the audience, the ‘imagined audience’ (whom journalists think they write for and of course also target groups) and the ‘reacting audience.’ Alberto pointed out that newspapers (especially the online versions) encourage reaction and I think that the analyses of production needs to blur the distinction between writers and readers, to grasp how themes and styles are shaped by images of and reactions from readers or potential readers. Explaining content by drawing parallels from other story telling traditions analyzing how political habits influences perspectives, also subverts the division between producers and receivers.

Best,

Ursula

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**Daniel Taghioff (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London)**  
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Dear Ursula,

I think there is a theoretical agenda in our area that can get us past structure and agency at least. Nick Couldry's work on how practices anchor one another is a clue. I had a long off-list

discussion with Jason Toynbee about this, who is a critical realist.

What we came to was that the critical issue is how aspects of practice anchor aspects of other practices. In other words, looking at the degrees and kinds of anchoring in practice. That way structure is not monolithic, but diffuse and imminent in practice, implicated with agency. This is also a researchable concept, you can look for this in practice, without divorcing interpretive agents from positioning *a priori*.

I think this corresponds fairly closely to how you discuss how news is positioned socially. News is anchored in advertising practices in very particular ways, which position it in a complex and somewhat dynamic fashion.

I would like to explore these issue further with you some day, but suffice to say it is pretty clear that structure-agency accounts tend to fall apart in relation to media practices.

Daniel

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**Ursula Rao (University of New South Wales, Sydney)**

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Dear all, dear Daniel,

Thank you Daniel. Yes, in a way you are right. I am in fact intrigued by Nick's idea about one practice anchoring another (though I am wondering why in his article 'theorizing media as practice' he emphasises that media practices anchor other practices, why not the other way round?? Is this just because he is in media sociology or is there a deeper issue here?)

On the other hand, I am still struggling with this idea, because to me it seems that as these sets of practices encounter each other they mutually alter each other, thus, it seems it is less of an 'anchoring' then a dynamic encounter, a process of 'communication', 'alteration.' The metaphor of anchoring seems to imply something much more static than I have in mind. Does it?

There is one other thing I have been pondering over. Kerstin, why would you pose that question about the audience? What it seems to imply is a message-receiver model, in which what newspapers write is directly relevant to what readers understand. This model of course has been destroyed very effectively by Stuart Halls *Encoding/Decoding*. Now, I am sure it would be fascinating to look at political discourses of newspaper readers. And I do have some unsystematic evidence that especially young people are fascinated and also still shocked when they see politicians ridiculed. And maybe I should add there is much more 'ridiculing of politicians' happening on the internet than in the more conservative press. However, the relation readers entertain and images they have of politicians is shaped by a range of influences, not least their personal relations (which are so important in everyday live in India). So why do you think this study needs the audience angle??

Best,

Ursula

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**Jason A. Toynbee (Open University)**

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Dear all,

I agree with Ursula. Nick Couldry poses media practices as anchoring other practices without explaining why they might do so – it's a mediacentric view of the world. On the general problem of practices altering other practices I'd say this poses a world of radical contingency: events unfold because people do stuff that has an impact on people who are doing other stuff and so on. That's kind of truistic but it also doesn't explain much. And it's why I think we need some notion of structure which is distinct from agency or practice, i.e. where agency emerges from structure and impacts back upon it so either reproducing or changing it.

On Ursula's other point, where she suggest that Kerstin consents to a message-receiver model a) I didn't get that impression and b) I don't think Hall destroys this model as Ursula puts it. He rightly points out that audiences don't necessarily 'take' messages, but may interrogate and resist them to some extent or other. Morley's work a few years later suggests that audiences may just ignore media messages. But none of this undermines producer-message-audience relations, without which we can surely have no conception of anything called media.

Best,

Jason

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**Katherine Martineau (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor)**

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Dear Ursula and group,

Thanks for such a rich paper! I regret having been delayed in joining the discussion. There's so much I'd love to talk about, but for now I'll just start with two related points that follow especially on the comments of Kerstin Andersson (28 Nov) and Alberto Sánchez (26 Nov). I apologize if I missed a response in my bursting inbox and these duplicate something already talked-out.

I agree that there's a lot to be contributed anthropologically even without elaborate discourse analysis of single media texts – though that's not to say form isn't important. I am wondering about the non-published forms of culture involved, and how they relate to the published. And I'm thinking of Spitulnik's (1996) essay on circulation. Specifically, I'm wondering about the forms of the conversations and gossip in which these gossipy political articles are a part. For instance: how do these new styles of journalism pick up on other recognizable popular styles of discourse / representation? This might be one way to pursue the relationship between

changes in newspaper texts and the 24 hour news channels, as well as to understand how these new styles of journalistic representation relate to the (creatively presupposed?) imagination of publics / audiences / social divisions. And how does this change the image (including the self-understanding) of the journalist him/herself (along the lines of Tom Wolfe's 2005 work on political subjectivity perhaps)?

My own initial research on journalism in eastern India among Oriya- and English-language journalists, and experiences among other kinds of cultural producers in India (dancers and scholars especially), make me especially want to know more about the surely-juicy gossip behind these changes in style. For example, you describe how other journalists picked up phrases from Banerjee's article. Is there personal gossip behind this? Is the fact that it was published in *The Times of India* important – I mean, would anyone at *The Times of India* ever pick up phrases / style from someone at *Sahara* or *The Indian Express*? In other words, how does position and status play into this, both at the individual and institutional level? Do the backgrounds of and public background knowledge about journalists and editors matter? Did the journalists who picked up Banerjee's style or phrasing do so consciously, or was it something that happened below awareness? I wonder about this, because in my (albeit limited) experience, circulating cultural forms often have detailed back stories (in my own work I think about these through what Judy Irvine (1996) calls “shadow conversations”) that participants recount and that influence how those forms circulate, and these often involve a great deal of knowledge and even unseemly gossip about the personal lives of the creative producers themselves – such that, for instance, talk about what someone wrote becomes talk about personal-moral-intellectual-political aspects of the writer.

And I just want to respond to the audience question. This seems to me to indicate some ongoing problems in our theoretical- methodological practice regarding circulation, and I mean circulation conceived broadly (perhaps in the sense of Lee and Lipuma 2002). Not duplicating the encoding/decoding model doesn't mean that we get to only focus on what people call “production” or “consumption,” but that we need a better way to connect our models of communication and culture with our practical methods (it's with this in mind that I asked the above questions about gossip and circulation of discursive style). Ursula, perhaps the audience question indicates an interest in how your larger project connects – both theoretically and methodologically – the study of style in political reporting with macro shifts in democratic practice.

Warm regards,

Katherine

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**Mark Hobart (SOAS, University of London)**

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Dear All,

Ursula raises an important point when she asks about why Nick Couldry should privilege media practices as anchoring other practices and indeed his insistence on anchoring altogether.

It so happens that Nick and I have just argued through this and other issues in a series of exchanges to be published shortly in *Theorizing Media and Practice*, eds. Birgit Bräuchler and John Postill, Berghahn. So it is interesting to see that Ursula's other others' thoughts are running in a similar direction.

Best wishes,

Mark

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**John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)**

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I'd like to tug at the thread started by Per Ståhlberg and continued by Alberto Sánchez about recent technological developments in the news media industry and whether Ursula's account, based on fieldwork undertaken in 1999-2000 and 2002, may require updating.

My concern here is of a general media anthropological nature, as I am wondering whether as a subfield we may perhaps be too worried about the seemingly swift obsolescence of our ethnographic materials. Surely field research undertaken in 1999 or 2002, or indeed in the 1980s, is as valid a contribution to the ethnographic record and to ongoing theoretical debates as that from 2007? I.e. it all adds to the comparative history of this field of inquiry.

A quick reminder: this seminar closes on Tuesday at 9 pm GMT, so there's still time for a final round of postings.

John

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**Kerstin B Andersson (University of Gothenburg)**

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Hi Ursula,

It was not at all my intention to appear critical to your paper, I only wanted to point out some issues that I think might be questioned and brought out of the very narrow discourse of the press and the articles that you are presenting.

A brief answer to your question on the audiences. Jason and Katherine have already provided some good arguments on it. My starting point is that you declare in your paper that you “discuss news texts with reference to the social environment that creates a particular perspective and thus gives political acts their meaning.” And I simply think that you should anchor it in the social context if this is what you aspire to do, including target groups, audiences etc. I think that Katherine took up an important issue emphasising the concept of communication.....

Kerstin

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**Fausto Barlocco (Loughborough University)**

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Dear members of the list,

I would like to throw in another line of argument that I think was touched by Anna's initial comment but (please take my apology if I am wrong) not followed by Ursula or anyone else. I found the argument about style, and its connection with a new market-oriented press, very interesting and I would like to add some debate on that and its implications.

I am mostly writing from the point of view of a 'layperson,' as my anthropological interest in the media has much more to do with reception and interpretation rather than production, and, moreover I have no background knowledge of the Indian situation, although Ursula's very good paper and the comments by other participants have much informed me on that. I happened to consider some of Ursula's main points in relation to the mediascape in Italy, my country of origin but where I have been living relatively little in recent years, which in some way seems to me to share some essential elements. It seems to me that India might not be so unique in regards to certain changes that have taken / are taking place within the mediascape, but that it might have some global commonalities, or at least with some of Western countries. What I am talking about is the increasing domination of the market interest in the media, which has often led to a 'tabloidisation' of the newspapers and to great changes in the television, especially in the news but also in other programmes. What seems to have happened to me is a general tendency towards, on the one hand, sensationalism and, on the other towards gossip, typical elements of the tabloids and certain television. What is new is that, at least it seems to me, this style has 'colonised' what was previously thought of as a bastion of 'serious reporting,' political reporting. This tendency is on the one hand liberating, as it frees (at least partially) media from state or political meddling, but on the other it does so through a type of discourse that often empties criticism of any ability to affect a change. I am thinking at recent media discourses (moving from more independent to mainstream ones such as main TV channels, including public ones, and newspapers as well as coming out in last summer's bestseller, *La Casta*, the caste) in Italy, all centered on criticising the politicians as corrupt,

parasites, drug-addicts and various other things. While there is an increase of attention on politics and politicians and on their flaws and misdeeds, the continual repeating, even screaming of these messages and the endless line of scandals seem just to create and satisfy a certain taste for public derision of powerful people and for the show inherent to it, while at the same time in some way pre-empting any real reaction and serving the interest of the market and the political caste at the same time.

While the Italian case might be a bit of a unique and extreme one, do you think that Ursula's material lends itself to be read in such a way? Would anybody agree that it is part of a general (more or less) global tendency?

Fausto Barlocco

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**Ursula Rao (University of New South Wales, Sydney)**

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Dear all,

Kerstin, I was absolutely not feeling that you were being critical, or too critical. In fact I thought your intervention was very helpful. As it happens sometimes overexposure to one's own material makes one blind for what is needed. So, thanks!!! (I would love to see what Jason and Katherine have written about this. Could you direct me to the source?)

However, I was wondering why you ask specifically about 'readers.' It is not the first thing I would think of. Of course we all dream about doing this all encompassing study in which we could integrate all kinds of possible contexts that are direly relevant. However, I have not really seen any study that looks at production AND reception (in the same depth). And I think there are good reasons for it, which may not only of practical nature. I think the relation between writers and readers here is quite complex. At times these contexts are completely different and divorced from each other. Obviously writers and readers relate to the same texts, which can in some complex way be said to have a message (or better messages). However, writing and reading is different as we all know. Although journalists have much less time to write than academics, they make the same difficult decisions, of choosing an approach, filling in and omitting, thinking of possible reader, going through edition, getting feedback from peers etc. Especially when they write a text that diverts from the 'norm,' they are highly conscious of it and have thought it through, are nervous about the reaction... and they can be absolutely sure that it would become gossip among journalists (journalist always notices one someone pushed the boundaries). Readers do not have the same involvement with news. I think Elizabeth Bird has shown this beautifully. We read a lot of texts on an every day basis and do not remember most of it. If we read and remember, we may not necessarily notice the difference, because we are hardly as familiar with the 'standards' as journalists are. I would think it is an interesting study to look at people consuming news (and particularly news that are different with regard to journalists' judgment). However, I think it would be a different study that would come up with very different results. Readers would be noticing other things, not necessarily that which creates uproar in journalistic and political circles.

Then how can I talk of social transformation? Because I think that there is another sense in which readers and writers are closely related. They share dominant narrative traditions, even if they may use them in different contexts, with different implications. Journalists push what is socially acceptable when speaking about politicians, politicians directly contest that,

journalists draw on narrative traditions when telling their stories (as you said and which I need to think about more), they closely interact with potential readers, they influence politicians' image making strategies, they get influenced by advertisement customers, etc. Journalists are embedded in a number of social contexts, which influence their work and the other way round, by being there they have a part to play and I think a powerful part in shaping social discourses. This influence is never global, but fragmented, noticed by some more than by others, and re-used and re-negotiated in other settings. I think your point that I need to add more context is absolutely valid, I am just not sure that analysis of reading practices would help here.

Fausto adds to the debate by pointing out that something I describe is happening also in other countries and media. I get the same feeling. However, again I think the relation is not quite as straight forward and dichotomous as he describes. It is not just readers wanting sensational news and journalists give it to them, or the market pushing journalists to be populist. It is a complex matrix of receptions (among different sets of actors), of pushing boundaries, of powerful interventions (everything in plural). My aim is to open a window to some section of this matrix. For me this means attacking too simple common sense notions of 'press is losing quality,' it is 'all just market driven,' 'politics has no content anymore' etc.

Mark, I thought that the 'argument' you had with Nick is very interesting and I am still digesting it. Very good intervention!!

Best,

Ursula

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**Elitza Ranova (Rice University)**

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Dear Ursula,

Thank you for the opportunity to read your exciting new work. Your engagement with form and style is especially intriguing as is the linkage between changing styles of reporting and changing ideas of the role of journalists. It looks like other list members have already commented along similar lines. I was on the road last week, and I am sorry for joining the conversation late. (I assume that the seminar has not closed yet.)

The paper convincingly links changes in style to larger political and economic changes. As mentioned earlier in the seminar (by Alberto Sánchez, I think), I too find myself wanting to know even more about the particularities of the new reporting style. On p. 11, you discuss one of the traits of the new style: "introducing the wider-context" and specifically "behind the scenes' information." I wonder whether there are other ways in which the context is engaged differently in the new reporting style. I do research in Bulgaria, and one criticism I often hear from the older generation of Bulgarian journalists is that the young members of the profession fail to exhibit a familiarity with the wider context within which news need to be situated. They see engagement with the wider context as a marker of all good journalism. Is this true in India as well? Are there specific ways of contextualization that are associated with the new style of reporting (in addition to uses of "behind-the-scenes' information")? Have you observed a generational divide corresponding to differences in style as well?

My second point also comes from a comparison with Bulgaria. Specifically, on p. 15 you write that “[a]ccording to a typical professional ethos, journalists were to function as an avant-garde that promotes the making of a modern nation-state in India.” Similarly, in Bulgaria and elsewhere in Eastern Europe journalists and intellectuals in the wider sense of the word historically were seen and saw themselves as “modernizers of the nation” and “a carrier of ‘higher’ (progressive and universal) European values and ideas” (Daskalov 2001: 58). This perception is being re-examined (but not yet significantly altered) during post-socialism, and it may be linked to changing perceptions of the self and its relationship to society. Your paper gestures to a similar process of re-imagining society and reordering of values: perhaps this is a move from a (roughly) socialist to neo-liberal orientation; from one variety of modernity to another; etc. The ideal of a sacrifice of the individual for the larger goal of national betterment gives place to a concern with individual freedom of choice and personal pleasure; the existence of a recognized public (national) ideal gives way to atomization of personal goals and recognition of personal desires and aspirations; the role of journalists changes from that of a social segment that leads others in “the right direction” to that of people who entertain and inform, but do not moralize. This is only one possible emphasis that already informs the paper. Perhaps it will prove useful expanding it and explicitly linking it to the theoretical framework/s that you find most relevant.

Thanks again for the thought-provoking paper. I greatly enjoyed it.

Best,

Elitza Ranova

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**John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)**

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Dear All,

On that final note from Elitza Ranova we have reached the end of the seminar. Many thanks to our presenter Ursula Rao, to our discussant Anna Horolets and to all other participants for an excellent session. As always there'll be a PDF transcript of the session up on the website soon.

The next seminar will run from 15 to 29 January 2008 both on this mailing list and on that of our sister network, the EASA Anthropology of Religion Network, with whom we are jointly organising the session. Erica Baffelli (Otago University, New Zealand) will be presenting a working paper titled “Media and religion in Japan: Oumu jiken as a turning point”.

Finally, a reminder that from tomorrow morning (Wed) GMT and closing at midnight on Saturday we shall be inviting self-nominations for the position of EASA Media Anthropology Network coordinator. Last-minute enquiries about this post are very welcome offlist at [j.postill@shu.ac.uk](mailto:j.postill@shu.ac.uk)

Best wishes,

John

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**Ursula Rao (University of New South Wales, Sydney)**  
u.rao@unsw.edu.au

Dear All,

I want to thank everyone for this wonderful seminar. John, thanks for hosting it and Elitza thanks for putting so much thought into your initial reply. There were heaps of interesting suggestions and critique and I know that I was not able to rely to everything immediately. Some of it will just need more time to sink in. I will go over the mails from these weeks again and again in future. They certainly help me a great deal to deepen my understanding and my analysis of journalism in India.

Thank you all for your time and thought.

Best,

Ursula