

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 8 : 2 February 2008

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Interactive Television Programmes: A Study in Media Ecology

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Media ecology

Media ecology is the study of how media and the processes of communication affect human perception, understanding, feeling, and value. It examines how the interface between media and society increases or impedes chances of human survival.

From another point of view, the word ecology implies the study of environments. Ecology is concerned with the structure, content of environments and the impact they exert on people. An environment, as such, can be conceived of as a complex message system, which imposes on human beings certain ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving.

It structures what we can see and say and, therefore, do. It assigns roles to us and insists on our playing them. It specifies what we are permitted to do and what we are not. Sometimes, as in the case of a courtroom, or classroom, or business office, the specifications are explicit and formal.

In the case of media environments (e.g., books, radio, film, television, etc.), the specifications are more often implicit and informal, half concealed by our assumption that what we are dealing with is not an environment but merely a machine.

Media ecology tries to make these specifications explicit. It tries to find out what roles media force us to play, how media structures what we are seeing, why media make us feel and act as we do etc. In short, Media ecology is the study of media as environments.

The Television as Environment

The electronic media that has expanded in a very rapid manner during the last decades of the past century is a clear instance of the concept of media as an environment. Here, the media itself becomes an active element in the process of communication, adding to the purpose and intent of the content that is often communicated.

In Kerala, where the development of the electronic media, especially the television, assumed literally gigantic proportions in the 80s and the 90s, the assessment of media as environments has become especially relevant. The coming of television channels in the private sector, starting with the **Asianet** in the late 80s, gained momentum with at least six channels now telecasting in Malayalam.

One of the differences that television as a media environment offers is the rewriting of the relationship between the viewer and the producer, actor, director etc. In radio, cinema etc which are the other principal forms of electronic media, the ways of incorporating the feedback from the audience is considerably less flexible.

In the television, and to an even larger extent, the internet, the audience is increasingly becoming a part of the producer. If the televised or exhibited film or television programme is thought of as a work offered by a team led by the director to another team that has no leader – the audience – the television and the internet have together made the latter a part of the former.

Evolution Of Interactive Programmes

Music competitions and film music based programmes like “Sa,ri,ga,ma” in **Asianet** can be termed the first generation interactive programmes of the television media after it was opened to private players. Talk shows where audience was also a part – like the famous “Nammal Thammil” anchored by Sreekantan Nair – also formed part of these first generation programmes.

(*Sa ri ga ma* had been broadcast in two forms – one as a music competition per se and another as a music show where film personalities were asked to participate. In *Nammal Thammil* an issue of contemporary significance was discussed by a panel of experts and prominent personalities who will interact with an audience in the set. “We, The people” anchored by Barqua Dutt and “The Big Fight” aired in the NDTV also fall into this genre.)

In the second generation programmes of inter active programmes can be seen programmes like *Tharikita* of Soorya TV and many other programmes where in the presenter or anchor places a phone call to any member of the audience on some pretext or other. The *tour de force* of such programmes is that the fact that the audience has been a part of the programme is revealed only at the very end. Programmes conducted by mimicry artists like Saju Kodiyan at various holiday resorts also fall into the same category.

(In *Tharikita*, people going about in ordinary life are caught unawares by the camera and they are put into contrived spots of susceptibility and embarrassment. In the finale the audience is shown how he or she had been made part of a television programme.)

One of the major developments in television and broadcasting journalism, marked by such shows is that it brought the tv camera from out the studios and their special atmosphere right into the middle of the society. Here, the camera is not a witness, like when it films a news event. Here, the camera is also as much a part of the programme as is the audience. The camera has an important role to play in the development of these programmes as such.

Reality shows like *Star Singer* and *Thakadhimi* in Malayalam, *Indian Idol* in Hindi, *Jodi Number One* in Tamil etc represent the third generation of inter active programmes where the programme itself revolves round the audience. The audience themselves are becoming part of the ecology of the programmes by directly influencing the form and tenor of these programmes. The earlier time gap between the formulation of

feedback on the part of the audience and its reception by the producer no longer exists and the audience itself has been transformed into part of the team of the producer or director of the programme, so to say. All the reality shows that are ruling the roost as major programmes with maximum viewer ship are the most recent examples of this trend.

Interpersonal Communication

It is of great significance that all these interactive programmes have, at their very core, a strong element of interpersonal communication. It was believed that the advent of mass communication techniques were the harbinger of the downfall of inter personal communication. The technical excellence possible in mass communication and the enormous reach such channels commanded also gave credence to this view. However, the present development of interactive programmes sketched earlier, point clearly to the return of interpersonal communication to the forefront of mass communication techniques. The basic characteristic of interpersonal communication is the provision of instant feedback. This is because both the sender and the receiver are in direct contact during the communication process.

The basic characteristic of visual communication is the provision for the exchange of ideas, information etc using purely visual texts. This is because the process of visual communication entails the translation of data and content into visual terms.

The basic characteristic of broadcast journalism is that it is a form of mass communication, wherein the message is transmitted from one sender or one group of senders to a large number of receivers. This means that the feed back response from the receivers to the sender is always delayed and may, in some cases, be indirect too.

Of these three forms of communications, interpersonal communication is the most basic. The other two forms – i.e., visual and broadcast – are basically forms which incorporate inter personal communication with modern mechanical communication processes.

One of the clearest examples for inter personal communication intersecting with the other two forms is interviews. Hence, it is vital for journalists and communication specialists to analyze and study the process and techniques of interviews and interviewing in some detail.

What Is An Interview?

An interview is an example of interpersonal communication that takes place basically between two persons.

Based on the purpose of an interview there can broadly be two kinds of interviews – the interview for information and the interview that unveils the personality of the person being interviewed. A journalist going about collecting information from an accident site is the best example for an interview in search of information; the well known interview series by Karan Thappar on **CNN – IBN** channel is an example for the personality oriented interview.

However, it has to be understood that this classification is not airtight. This is rather a differentiation made from the point of view of analyzing and understanding the technique and technology of interviewing. In real life situations both these types of interviews can be seen to be intermingled. For example a number of questions related to hitherto unknown facts and details about the interviewee and his or her sphere of activities – information, unknown from the point of view of either the interviewer or the listener or viewer – are asked by Karen Thapar in his program called the “Devil’s Advocate”. Similarly, a number of human-interest stories are evolved out from the wayside interviews conducted by journalists primarily in search of information about specific incidents.

Preparing For An Interview

The most basic aspect of an interview is the questions that are asked. The success of any interview is basically dependent upon the kind of questions that are asked. In order to ask relevant and pertinent questions, the interviewer must get prepared by gathering some information about the interviewee.

Here, a basic paradox can be seen. As part of preparations for an interview, a set of basic information on the person being interviewed has to be gathered; but in order to gather such information, the interviewer might have to conduct some more interviews. The paradox can be solved only by positing two kinds of interviews and by inferring that the information-gathering interview is part and parcel of the professional existence of the journalist.

Questions asked in any interviews basically fall into two types – open questions and shut or closed questions. Shut or closed questions are basically aimed at collecting information. Open questions are such that the answers will lead to further questions, all of which together will ultimately result in the personality of the interviewee being presented in the most catching manner possible.

The questions need not be written down; but such a list of questions may make for only a mediocre interview. It is one of the clearest signs of a beginner when a reporter arrives with questions all written out and three lines or so left between questions to write down the answers. It is far better to let the conversation follow its own path, with a little steering and nudging from the interviewer. Listening to the response to one question, transcribing it, framing the next question, shaping the form in which the interview is to be published – all these has to be done at the same time, and indeed it can be, with a little practice.

Interviewing

After the preparations the interviewer reaches the interview spot. Here, he has to make sure that the recording equipment is in the perfect condition. This is particularly important if one is recording for the electronic media, since in such cases the recording will be the very basis of the program. As far as the print journalist is concerned, the recording will be the most authentic reference material.

The Interview Proper

As far as the question of how to conduct the interview is concerned, planning is of utmost importance. Give some serious thought to the information you want to get from the news source and how to elicit those answers. But don't be so focused on the point of the interview that you jump right in with substantive questions. An interview is also a social interaction; the best ones start with a minute or two of polite small talk about the weather, last night's game or whatever.

It is important that the interview just degenerates into a question answer session. Try to have a "conversation" when possible, instead of just asking questions.

Usually three or four opening questions can be prepared earlier so that the interview can be easily got rolling. Then it is largely dependent on how the interviewer follows up on what the interviewee says.

One of the more important aspects of good interviewing is the process of making the interviewee relaxed. This will make for more complete answers and the possibility of asking better follow up questions.

Controversial and tricky questions can be saved up for later in the interview. Here also, if the interviewer is able to make the interviewee relaxed, he will stand a better chance of putting in the difficult question and oozing out a better answer.

Use of Quotations

After the interview is over, the information gathered can be divided mainly into two types: information that can be paraphrased and attributed and information that will have to be quoted directly, in exactly the same words as the interviewee.

Paraphrased quotations should still reflect the substance and tone of what the person said, but they do not need quotation marks, which are used only for direct quotations.

There is a lot of controversy about whether the words in quotation marks, the direct quotations, should be cleaned up and, if so, how much. People often say "uh" and "well" or have other verbal tics. Should you include those stutters if you are quoting someone directly? Most papers would take out such words. What about if a person starts a sentence, then stops and begins again? In that case, it is perfectly all right to begin the quotation with the second effort - in a sense, all quotations are partial quotations. A reporter almost never prints every word of the interview, from the first "hello" to the final "goodbye."

However, what is inside quotation marks should be exactly what the speaker said. Some reporters, especially at magazines, claim that they can clean up the grammar of a quotation as long as they do not change the meaning, but that is a very dangerous practice. How people speak is often almost as important as what they say. To take it upon oneself to change how people speak is very hard to justify.

Writing Up The Interview

The process of writing up the interview is similar to writing any news story. The lead has to be found out and placed in the opening paragraph itself.

Whether the interview is to be reproduced as a question and answer session or as a text, interspaced with paraphrases as well as quotations – the ultimate judge will be the interviewer himself. As a rule of thumb, it can be said the personality interview comes

alive better when reproduced in question answer sessions with lot of quotes and background descriptions, while the information interview is best reproduced as a story, using the maximum of paraphrases.

Conclusion

In short, the television and the internet are rewriting the relationship between the director and producer of programmes on the one hand and the audience of these programmes on the other. The audience themselves are becoming part of the ecology of the programmes by directly influencing the form and tenor of these programmes. The earlier time gap between the formulation of feedback on the part of the audience and its reception by the producer no longer exists and the audience itself has been transformed into part of the team of the producer or director of the programme, so to say. The reality shows that are ruling the roost as major programmes with maximum viewership – like *Star Singer* and *Thakadhimi* in Malayalam, Indian Idol in Hindi, Jodi Number One in Tamil etc – are the most recent examples of this trend.

This paper has also attempted to point out that the basis of all these developments is the essentially inter personal nature of media as a whole. As far as mass media is concerned, the element of interpersonal communication has always been an integral part of all programmes. Hence the format of interviews has been analyzed and described as one of the principal techniques used in the media environment to enhance relationship between the producer – director team on the one hand and the audience on the other.

Thus, the paper concludes that the format of the interview is an interpersonal interactive exercise that aims at either collecting information or describing a person or situation. The reporter interviews the person and then he writes up the interview, keeping in mind the needs and necessities of the mass media.

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