



INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

TELEVISION IN SINGAPORE

An Analysis of a Week's Viewing

Erhard U. Heidt

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PREFACE

The analysis presented in this paper forms part of a larger study on "Television as a Symbol System: Cultural Heritage in Modern Mass Communication". The field phase of this project was conducted in 1982/83 at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies under the Stiftung Volkswagenwerk Southeast Asia Fellowship for German Scholars. I hope to be able to finish the manuscript of the research project as a whole in 1984.

The television programmes, on which the investigation is based, were telecast in September 1982. Since the quantitative analysis has already been conducted and offers some interesting insights in itself, it was decided to make this data available as soon as possible and not wait for the final manuscript.

In order, however, to preclude a misunderstanding of the scope and aim of the study, which might arise from the publication of only part of the project data, I shall use the introduction to outline the conceptual framework and the methodological approach of the project as a whole.

My thanks are due to the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies for making this research possible through their Stiftung Volkswagenwerk Southeast Asia Fellowship and for all the technical, clerical, and personal assistance provided during my stay in Singapore.

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Erhard U. Heidt

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INTRODUCTION

Television and the Issue of Identity

It is a commonly shared belief not only among laymen but also among scholars that mass media, in particular television, have a strong impact on their audience. While most people believe that the media have a direct effect on the attitudes and behaviour of the individual, the experts have become more careful. They define the role of mass media as factors in socialization, as mediators of knowledge and world-views, and regard them as instruments of enculturation, which contribute to the shaping of a cultural identity, mainly by means of their explicit contents. Even television, however, with its apparently truthful reflection of reality is not a replica-like representation of actual society, but rather a symbolic reflection of its value structure. The iconic signs of television meet a whole range of cultural meanings, which on a higher level are integrated into a comprehensive cultural picture of the world -- a world-view. The cultural determination of television systems and programmes is often asserted, but seldom is the specific manner and manifestation of a cultural influence disclosed -- apart from a rather global juxtaposition of American and non-American (European or Third World countries) cultures. What is usually lacking are thorough analyses of the content and form of television programmes and their relation to the specific socio-cultural and socio-political context in which they appear.

A discussion of mass media in developing countries or regions almost inevitably turns to the issue of media, tradition and change, and to the role television plays in the preservation and formation (or deformation) of cultural and national identities. In Singapore, these questions are rendered even more complex since Singaporeans are faced with the problem of:

- a simultaneous identity as a member of a culture, the

centre of which is outside Singapore, and as a Singaporean, as well as

- living side by side with other Singaporeans who are supposed to have the same national identity but different cultural identities.

In a simplified manner, one might say that the cultural identity of a Singaporean has its most obvious manifestations in his language (Chinese, Malay, or Indian), while the shared national identity is founded on the English language. Hence, the typical Singaporean has been described as bicultural (Clammer 1981); this is similar, if not identical with what Chan and Evers (1973) have termed the "double identity" of the Singaporean population.

The reference to language, however, is not enough to satisfactorily answer the question: What is the substance, the uniqueness of this cultural or national identity? A number of authors have attempted to contribute an answer (for examples, Benjamin 1976; Chan and Evers 1973; Chew 1976; Clammer 1981; Hassan 1976). Most of them make reference to the composite elements "Asian/traditional" and "Western/modern", and the respective value-orientation. An appropriate description of the "Singaporeanness", not just of the Singaporean population as a whole but also of the distinct cultural subgroups, would have to identify the underlying value-structure of the modern or transitional domain as well as that of the more traditional ethnic-cultural background. Values, however, cannot be observed and analysed *per se*; they become manifest via beliefs and expectations in customs, institutions, and roles: "Values are communicated, both explicitly and implicitly, through symbolic behaviour" (Sitaram and Haapanen 1979, p. 153).

If it is true, firstly, that television in societies with a developed technological mass communication system occupies the centre of the culture, and secondly, that the problem of national and cultural identities is a central issue in multilingual and multi-ethnic Singapore, then this issue should be reflected in the programmes telecast in the Republic. Hence the research questions for the present study can be defined as:

- What are the behavioural patterns, attitudes, and value-orientations implied or explicitly communicated through the television programmes in Singapore?
- What in the television programmes can be explained as an expression or a symbolic manifestation of cultural and national identities in Singapore?

A thorough investigation of these questions is not complete without a general discussion of basic issues such as the following:

- paradigms and results of media research,
- the social definition/construction of reality,
- national and cultural identity,
- ethnicity and cultural heritage,
- language and culture,
- Asian and Western values,
- tradition and modernization.

These issues indeed form an important part of the background and a framework for the study as a whole and will be dealt with in the final manuscript.

Methods of Study

In spite of the frequent statements on the effects of television on Singapore's society, the available literature only incidentally contains data which relate to the topic of the present study. Apart from an occasional table giving a breakdown of programmes according to language, and main countries of origin, or according to gross programme categories, such as drama, education/information, etc., there is lack of more specific data on the type and content of telecast programmes within these gross categories. In order to obtain the data necessary for this study, a combined quantitative and qualitative approach has been chosen. A quantitative view is taken to identify the overall structure of SBC's television programmes, in particular the frequency and time allocation of programmes in different languages, programme types and topics, and imported and local items. On a second level, the view is a qualitative one. Here I will try to describe the kind of programmes that are telecast and, in particular, their content and the important ideas transmitted. The present paper, however, reports only the results of the quantitative analysis. Hence, it may suffice to shortly describe the methods used in this case.

The source to be analysed is evident: the programmes of the two channels of the only television station in Singapore, that

is, the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC). Since television stations all over the world usually have a very strict programme structure, in which one day differs from the next, but in which the programmes on the same weekday over the months are very similar, it was held that each weekday should be represented. In view of the time limitations of the project, a full week also seemed to be the maximum which could be handled. Although it was not possible to select a sample which -- in the strict sense of empirical research methodology -- can be regarded as representative of Singapore's television programmes, care was taken to make the sample as typical of the average Singaporean television programme as possible:

- In considering the month of analysis, August was ruled out, since the extensive coverage of events related to the National Day for more than two weeks results in a very obvious deviation from the average programme. September, in comparison, could be considered normal.
- A "constructed week" procedure was used (cf. Jones and Carter 1959), in which a sample of seven different weekdays was selected during the period from 10 to 25 September 1982. During this period, every third day was selected.
- In order to further identify deviations from the normal programme structure, the programme schedule of each selected day was compared with the published schedule of the three other same weekdays in September 1982. The comparison was made with respect to overall structure, time allocated to the four languages, and type and content of the programmes. No major deviation was found.

During the seven selected days, all television programmes (with the exception of the special school television programmes) of both SBC's channels were video-recorded. In this way, they were available for easy replay and reference.

For the purpose of this study, it is apparently easy to define the unit of analysis as "a programme item as it is produced, announced and hence generally perceived as a reference label by the audience"; and the first analysis indeed concentrates on units according to this definition. The matter, however, becomes more complex with the introduction of the concept of "television as flow" as put forward by Williams (1974), since this involves a shift from recording units to context units (Holsti 1969). While in all other media and communication systems before the advent of broadcasting, the essential items were discrete (they were offered as a sequence of specific events), the television experience of today is one of

flow. This explains why the viewer tends to stay with whatever channel he began to watch (this recognition has direct consequence for programming, in particular for advertising policies), and why it is so difficult for many viewers to switch their television sets off. Media research to date has hardly been influenced by this concept, which does not regard the published sequence of discrete programme units as the most important characteristic, but rather the sequence transformed by the inclusion of another kind of sequence (first by the broadcasters and then by the viewers). A research approach which breaks the central television experience of flow back into discrete programme units, and studies only these units, leaves out of consideration a factor with important effects on the audience and thus misses an essential characteristic of a specific television system. A study which takes the concept of flow into account has to proceed on different levels of analysis, which, of course, has to consider the declared programme units and their subunits but which attempts, in addition, to identify and describe their relation and interrelation in the flux of a particular evening's programme. An attempt in such an analysis is included in this paper.

II

PROGRAMME STRUCTURE

The following quantitative analysis and description is based on the recording of seven weekdays. It describes the programmes as they have been really telecast and deviates slightly from the printed programme schedules, since it takes into account those changes which occur without prior announcements.

The tables in the Appendices which break down the total air-time into time-slots allocated to different languages, programme types, and so forth, do not take into account those "hidden" programme types which are never published, although they are telecast each day and take up a considerable amount of air-time. They comprise commercials, internal publicity of the television station, national policy messages, and presentation of national symbols. Taking these programmes statistically correct into account would have required an enormous time-taking effort, since these programmes, in particular the commercials, are quite unevenly distributed, so that some popular dramas are surrounded and interrupted up to five times by over forty advertisements, while other programmes are not affected at all. Time for these programme types has been taken cumulatively but, nevertheless, carefully. The exact timing of these short items (often less than 20 seconds), however, is prone to marginal errors. In addition, the necessary change of cassettes was made on four days during a commercial interval between programmes; the missing data have been averaged from the remaining three days.

Figures, which as a whole are taken as approximating the average television week in Singapore, have been rounded so as to add up to 100%. Hence, small differences in quantitative value should not be taken as a basis for far-reaching conclusions. None of the findings of this study will be based on small nominal differences.

Type of Programmes: Categories

The categories used to describe the different types of television programmes are not fully mutually exclusive. It is not always easy to separate one category from another. The ensuing difficulties in unambiguously describing actual television programmes by means of these categories is enhanced by the fact that an individual programme may contain elements which fall into different categories. In such a case, the category which either describes the main focus of the programme or the terms in which it is planned, presented and hence generally perceived by the audience has been used. In the following descriptions an effort has been made to identify potential cases of ambiguity and to indicate relations and distinctions between the categories.

The following listing of programme types does not constitute an order of priority or importance attached to the different types of programmes. The categories are grouped in such a way that those numbered 1 to 5 may be described as having their main focus on information transmission, that is, after watching these programmes the viewer should have acquired additional knowledge or formed an opinion about an issue. In contrast, categories numbered 6 to 10 have their main focus on what is traditionally labelled "entertainment", that is, the main interest and the fun is supposed to be derived from the act of watching: it would not matter very much if one could not remember the informational content of these programmes the next morning. Categories numbered 11 to 14 refer to "hidden" programme items which as a rule are not printed in any television schedule, but which are nevertheless telecast every day, occupy a considerable amount of air-time, and often give a distinct colouring to an evening's telecast.

1. News. This category is reserved for news bulletins which are labelled accordingly in the programme print-out.
2. Documentary/Feature/Magazine. Programme items under this category give, mainly and essentially, a direct presentation of the substance of an issue. This category is subdivided according to topical focus into culture and arts, current affairs, history, magazine, nature, and science.
3. Opinion/Discussion. This category refers to specially arranged items of argument and discussion. The formation of opinion or the clarification of an issue is, however, not achieved by a direct presentation of the issue in question as in "Documentary" but by an exchange of arguments and opinions about it.

4. Education. This category refers to non-formal programmes for self-improvement, mainly by teaching specific skills in the field of crafts and hobbies. It does not include the formal course programmes for schools which are telecast on selected weekdays between 11.20 a.m. and 3 p.m. These programmes are apparently not intended for even incidental viewing by the general public, since their schedule is neither printed in the weekly television supplement of the popular daily newspapers nor in the **Radio and TV Times**, published by SBC itself.
5. Local Information. Items under this category give information about local events and happenings as well as advice and suggestions about activities in Singapore. This category, however, does not include commercial advertising programmes nor announcements about television programmes themselves; these items will be dealt with under separate headings.
6. Children's Programme. This category refers to those programmes which are specifically produced and presented for children. Although children will usually watch other programmes as well, items in this category are explicitly presently to that target audience. This category has the subdivisions of drama/narration and educational/informational programmes. Both these subdivisions overlap with other programme types. Their listing under "Children's Programme", however, seems to be justified since firstly they are **children's** programmes, and secondly, the educational programmes such as "Sesame Street", "The Electric Company", "3-2-1 Contact", and so forth, often conceal their educational and instructional intentions under an entertaining cover of cartoons, puppets and other dramatic devices. In contrast to all other programme categories in this list, "Children's Programme" does not refer to a type of content but to an intended audience target group. It is nevertheless relevant as a category, since it is used by producers and viewers alike. The subcategories, then, refer to the type of content - paralleling or repeating the categories of non-children programmes.
7. Drama. Items under this category include plays in the traditional sense, that is, they translate a story, a plot into dramatic presentation. This category is subdivided, using the conventional labels "adventure" (including detective drama), and "family" (including comedy).

8. Sports. This is defined as televised sports events or reports of such events.
9. Music. This category refers to programmes in the traditional concert-hall style, in the sense that they are essentially straight-forward presentations of musical pieces from a mainly classical (European or Asian) repertoire.
10. Show. This category contains the rest -- very often taking up a considerable amount of programme time -- of what is conventionally conceived as "light entertainment programmes". Its two subdivisions are musical shows, and games and quiz programmes. The musical show differs from the "Music" programmes in that it emphasizes the **show** character of the presentation and is often interspersed by other items, such as comedy, so that the dividing line to a variety show is difficult to draw. In this study, a variety show is treated as a variation of a musical show.
11. Commercial. This category comprises all advertising programmes with the exception of SBC internal publicity items, and national policy messages.
12. National Policy Message. This category refers to programmes telecast on behalf of government or government-related authorities with information about the direction of national and societal politics, such as speeches by government representatives, or with appeals to mobilize the audience for national development, for desired activities or changes in behaviour, such as national campaigns.
13. Publicity (Television Internal). This includes the presentation of programme information with respect to SBC's television programmes through previews, advance announcements, and so forth.
14. National Symbols. Items in this category consist of presentations of such items as the National Anthem, the national flag, or other approved or conventional national symbols.

Programmes of the Week: An Overview

Television transmission hours in the recorded week total 115:40 hours. Of this total air-time 72:50 hours, or 63% of