Cultural Diversity In Television Narratives

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Abstract

This work argues that the current state of television within cultural studies in Uganda is marked by considerable areas of theoretical and political uncertainty. The spread of deregulatory and privatizing public policies in relation to television, and the disarticulation of television from the idea of the national community and from the role of the citizen, have posed new problems for theorizing the relation between television and its audiences. In this article the author surveys a number of key areas including: the relation between television, the nation and the state; television and the citizen/consumer, television content and performance, and the likely future(s) of television.

Keywords Citizen, Consumer, Cultural studies, Media Performance, Nation, Television

Introduction

There is now a rich academic tradition of research into and analysis of television, as well as a considerable uncertainty about the likely future(s) of the medium. Indeed, it is ironic that just as television studies have achieved academic credibility, the object of study is controlled, some would suggest, on the brink of undesirability.

Academic and industry representatives certainly suggested that television is far from a declining or irrelevant medium.

The critical analysis of television has always been enclosed within a set of debates about the medium and the culture: its object, according to one of the earlier formulations, is to 'know what television means, for its producers, its audiences, its culture'(Newcomb, 1975/1987). Horace Newcomb wrote this in 1975, a few years before Fiske and Hartley's Reading Television (1978) taught a generation of media students how to understand television as culture.

The identification between the construction of popular culture and the reading of television was later effectively formalized in the title of Fiske's Television Culture (1987). The development of textual analysis and ideological critique within cultural studies during the 1980s increasingly

occurred through examples drawn from television, building up the methodological collection of cultural studies while also assembling the standard of resources for future television studies.

While they have developed in different ways in their various locations, the histories of the two fields of cultural studies and television studies are closely interrelated, both then and now, and in what follows I do not make a systematic distinction between them.

In this effort I want to broaden the context by reviewing a series of debates where cultural studies of television are facing a degree of theoretical and practical uncertainty. In the mapping exercise that follows, the issues in play tend to be quite clear. It is readily apparent that significant shifts are in process: in the structures of production and consumption, in the politics underwriting regulatory regimes, and in the discussion of the politics of contemporary television content and performance. It is less clear, at the level of critical and analytic practice, what we should think – or, more contentiously, do – about them. Neither cultural studies nor television studies, I have argued elsewhere (Turner, 1999), are quite as helpful in this endeavor as they may have been in the past.

I know that such an observation implies a specific version of both cultural studies and television studies and ideally I should now elaborate and defend these specific versions. However, I would argue that the trends I want to highlight are more or less visible whatever construction of television or cultural studies you might want to defend.

The simple suggestion I wish to make at the outset is that, at the present conjuncture, we confront more than the usual repertoire of genuine uncertainties about the future of television and about the kinds of interventions that should be made by academics interested in taking this future seriously.

What emerged from many papers during the 'Television: Past, Present And Futures' conference was a surprisingly common set of unresolved theoretical and practical issues about television as a technological form, about the present cultural function of television, and about the future of the medium. Let me continue, then, by reviewing some of the broad areas into which these issues fall.

Television, the nation and the state

Within most contemporary political economies of the media industries, the focus is on globalization: the media's enclosure within a wholly commercial, deregulated, multinational environment (Herman and McChesney, 1997).

Consequently, the relation between television and the nation-state is seen to be of diminishing importance. As television signals now routinely cross national borders and as national borders themselves evanesce and fade, national regulatory systems surrender their jurisdictions and local markets become transnational markets (or, as Coca-Cola would describe them, multi-local markets).

The declining audience share enjoyed by free-to-air broadcasters in Uganda and the proliferation of programming choices offered through subscription services fragment the television audience by breaking it down into taste-based niche markets. Within such a context, the possibility that television might continue to function as the location for the construction of a national community seems increasingly unlikely.

There remains scope for considerable political and theoretical debate, then, on the place of 'the national' and the role of the state within contemporary television. While all the various parties to the debate present their views with the certainty that comes from seeing one's own region or national space as normative, the views themselves vary significantly as they present highly diverse readings of the (actual and desired) relationship between television and the nation-state.

Where they exist, the publicly funded broadcasting institutions are among the cornerstones of the relation between television, state and nation.

The actual relationships constructed between the public broadcasters is of course extremely varied and, in some cases, it has to be remembered, these institutions are frankly repressive, aimed at serving exclusive political ends.

Ideally, of course, the relation between the public broadcaster and the state is managed through an arm's-length regulatory system aimed at protecting the public interest.

Frequently, this objective is pursued through a principled rejection of any commercialization of the public broadcaster's activities. There is a clear opposition set up between the interests and objectives served by the public sector and those served by the private or commercial sector. In

practice, if not in principle, most would agree this opposition is breaking down now. Very few public broadcasters operate without any commercial support, as national governments have increasingly offloaded responsibility for the support of public broadcasting to the private sector.

In some cases, this has taken the form of complete privatization – as effectively occurred during the 1990s with the significant effects on the public broadcaster's capacity to perform a role substantially different from that played by the commercial industry.

The consequence, in such a case, is the disappearance of the rationale for having a public broadcasting service at all. There are competing views on this, as not everybody would regard government maintenance of a public broadcasting service as self-evidently desirable.

Typically, some would characterize the trend towards the privatization of public broadcasting as a desirable process of economic liberalization, freeing up an important cultural institution from the control of the state, and instituting a more direct relationship between the broadcaster and its audience. Others – and this would be my position – would see it as surrendering the public interest to the interests of capital.

The process does, however, reflect a trend that is generally noticeable across African cultures: a decline in the political will to regulate cultural production on behalf of the public or national interest. Not only the specific point of regulation questioned – why regulate, and on whose behalf, for example, are the questions asked – but the appropriateness of regulation as a means of achieving socially or culturally desirable outcomes is questioned too.

Governments almost routinely prefer the operation of the market to regulation as a means of responding to the public interest. While such positions are often held in principle – that is, their proponents categorically prefer the use of the market rather than government in most matters – there are also more pragmatic considerations.

A widely-held view is that the nation-state no longer has either the authority or the capacity to install and maintain regulatory systems over media access and content.

There is another dimension to this. Withdrawal from regulation in the face of the increasingly transnational character of media industries also involves the abnegation of another set of responsibilities. In the past, government oversight of media performance has been underpinned by

the notion that media power must not be allowed free play without the constraint of some form of social obligation.

This is not necessarily any longer a widelyheld notion. At the same time as the democratic controls implicit in national regulatory systems are diminishing, the ethical orientation which emphasizes the social responsibilities of media organizations has also declined.

In such an environment, there is little reason why either the nation or the citizen should expect their interests to be recognized or defended by the media. As a result, there are many who would have no sympathy with nationalism as an ideal, but who might still regret the decline in the capacity of national governments to mandate a level of social obligation for their media industries. Of course, like all the grand narratives of postmodernity that have flourished since we dispensed with the idea of 'The Grand Narrative', there are exceptions.

John Hartley's work in the late 1990s (1996, 1999) describes the popular commercial media, and television in particular, as the equivalent of the agora for today's popular publics. However, we are being told increasingly that the precise way in which such a function as this might be performed in specific national contexts in the future is by no means as clear as it appeared to be, even in 1996, when Hartley's Popular Reality was published. Certainly, the relatively taken-for-granted elision between a nation's television and the idea of a national community – once an unproblematic Turner

Identification if only because it tended to be denominated in early cultural studies of television in the Uganda is no longer possible. On the one hand, and certainly this would be the view from the Ugandan community, this is a good thing as it fractures a conservative and complacent hegemony that repressed alternative or minority positions in the pursuit of a national consensus.

What does one do, as a citizen of a sovereign country that constitutes itself in such a muted manner through television? And how does that sit with the fact that the issue of sovereignty, in all its instantiations, is a crucial political question for Ugandans? While many of us might be skeptical about the value of nationalism as a principle for political action, Ugandan audiences persistently experience the erasure of cultural specificities that they consider mattering. This is a geopolitical context in which a national television regulatory system has very limited possibilities, but in which the representation of national difference is fundamentally important for cultural and political reasons. So, what do you do if you want a Ugandan television to do more for the Ugandan

community than it does at present? That is a question for television and cultural studies theory, as well as for the pragmatics of cultural politics in Uganda itself.

Television, the citizen, and the consumer

Once you disconnect television from the discursive context of the nation-state, then television's implication in the construction of citizenship starts to look a little more problematic. Although traditional theories of broadcasting emphasized the importance of television, more than most media, in the cultural construction of the citizen that was a product of an era when free to-air was the only system for the delivery of television programming to a mass audience.

As systems of delivery have multiplied and diversified, the assumption that the national citizen shares a common television diet with a significant proportion of the rest of their society is less tenable.

Rather than citizenship being the outcome of a chain of production, distribution and consumption that involved relatively few possible variations, contemporary consumers/citizens in a multichannel environment have an enormous array of possibilities before them.

As a result, theories of the relation between television and the citizen now emphasize the highly contingent manner in which television plays its part in the construction of identity. John Hartley, in Uses of Television (1999), talks of 'citizenship' to describe the relations of consumption for television. Such a formulation regards the individual consumer as the site where the identity of the citizen is constructed rather than, as was the case when Reading Television was published, the television text.

This is a substantial shift and its specific character is caught by seeing it, as so many have done, as a shift from describing the individual member of the television audience as a citizen to describing them as a consumer (see, for example, Chaney, 1994). Given the production of consumer choice in this cultural field, and not with-standing the fact that the differences between choices may seem minimal, the structural similarity between the consumer's relation to a market and the citizen's role in a mass democracy has encouraged an elision of the two terms.

Political and consumer choices start to look very similar in a world where identity is actively claimed by the citizen through a diverse popular media rather than unilaterally assigned through the sense-making mechanisms of consensual zing media texts.

So when Hartley (1999) talks of 'democratainment', he writes into this description of the 'uses of television' in societies on particular politics, not just a mode of consumption. The neologism is designed to respond to the proliferation of minority access to television commonly seen to mark the explosion of infotainment, lifestyle and talk show programming in the North American market (Shattuc, 1997). However, it has its limits. Nevertheless, the blurring of the distinction between the citizen and the consumer does hold potential for the 'liberation' of the popular from establishment or elite agendas, if you will, and that is why it remains the subject of optimistic accounts in cultural studies and television studies.

Once there is an implicit parallel between the free market and democratic structures, the notion of regulation starts to look tautological. Citizens' control can give way to consumer choice precisely because they are endowed with a structural equivalence.

In most contexts in which this is discussed now, and certainly in the context of public debates on media regulation, there seems to be greater political confidence in the stability of market forces than in the effectiveness of regulatory mechanisms.

Certainly, the notion of 'choice' itself has been widely deployed by governments, industries and citizens' groups seeking access and equity, as a principle to be pursued. Choice becomes a key principle in discussions of the uses of television for the citizen/consumer. The merging of video games and television, the delivery of television via the home, the amount of television-related subsidiary material available for consumption through the web – all of these have made it more difficult to describe the behaviors of certain highly media-literate groups as primarily the consumption of television.

As Lynn Spigel's article reveals, the material object of television, the set itself, may not be as discrete as we think it is, being implicated in a narrative of domesticity and progress that infers meaning onto its mere presence, let alone the material it carries.

This opens up another dimension of television and cultural history concerning the role of television in constructing domestic and suburban space.

Television content and performance: Among the consequences of the overwhelming concentration on technological and policy debates that has marked recent discussions of television, has been a growing silence about the content of television. To an increasing degree, discussions of what the media actually plays, how the media actually performs, have been collapsed into discussions of systems of delivery, and television is no exception. Content was where cultural studies of television started – with 'reading television' for its ideological burden, for its manufacture of consent and, later, for its specific pleasures and transgressive potential.

However, in more recent years, content has been dealt with through notions of performance.

Television programming has been discussed in terms of its relation to an articulated set of ethical, aesthetic or political principles, especially regarding television news and current affairs. However, in a field that has largely left ideology critique behind and has become preoccupied with the technological and policy debates that have become necessary in response to major shifts in the structure of the media industries, content has become an increasingly empty category.

I would suggest, in the construction to identity, where there is a clear need for much more work on television content, though, this is in the comparative dimension.

While it is certainly true that Ugandan programming is ubiquitous, there are also massive variations in the choices available in various national markets around the world. These differences still matter a great deal but in recent years we have failed to give them their due.

Perhaps we have become so distracted by the momentum of globalization that we have failed to appreciate how unevenly it has operated. An exception to these arguments, and where there has indeed been a great deal of focus on content and performance, is in relation to television journalism.

There is an increasing distance between a journalism based on fourth estate principles and a journalism struggling to mould its genres.

The future

Lynn Spigel's article discusses television as one component within an integrated media and information system that now helps to shape the domestic space in prosperous African countries.

The boundaries between television and computing, between television and telephony, even between television and the electrical system in the 'smart house' of the future, are making it increasingly difficult to maintain a sense of television as a discrete technology. At the same time, even in those areas where it is still possible to do this – broadcast and subscription. it is clear that the operational environment is changing significantly.

As noted earlier, the decline of public broadcasting and the possible decline in significance of free-to-air broadcasting as a whole suggest a very different role for television in the construction of a public culture in the future.

This is a situation where the future is largely in the capture of interests one can name, and the influence of our own communities, in general, over this future is extremely limited. We may be confronting a situation where television will need to reinvent itself: when the medium is no longer the primary location for the construction of community identity, and as Television is able to market itself profitably to ever more specific constituencies. Or, alternatively, it may be that the public sphere function performed by television proves to be fundamental, a necessary mechanism for the construction of culture and identity.

Conclusion

The point of effort was to provide some background to the concerns emerging from the 'Television: Past, Present and Futures' concerns suggesting that the study of television confronted a number of relatively new difficulties or ambiguities. What emerges is a number of oppositions that are not easy to resolve from within cultural studies and that remain unfinished business for those of us who work in this field. Among the patterns which underpin this survey are positions which pitch social responsibility against commercial responsibility; public utility against private consumption; and ethics against entertainment.

Of further concern are the contradictions embedded in the contemporary structure of the global commercial industry; where enfranchising potential implicit in the diversification of television

content runs contrary to global concentration of ownership and control. All of these, in turn, reflect the difficulties that arise as we accommodate ourselves to the privatization of broadcast media without fully surrendering the notion that the media are must be in some way responsible to the community.

How does one recognize the shift to commercial entertainment, without the conservative panic motivating and still maintain a sense that the community can control or influence the content and character of the media they consume? While it is relatively easy to map the shifts I have been describing, it is not at all easy to find the point of balance from which one might answer that question. Until it is found, uncertainties about critical and analytic practice which underlie contemporary theoretical developments in television and cultural studies are bound to remain. It is hoped that the articles in this special issue, 'Television and Cultural Studies', will help move us some way towards resolving this fundamental concern.

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