Loose canons

commentary as the missing object
in Indonesian media studies

loose cannon on a rolling deck *n.* [1970s+] (orig. US) an
unstable person, one who may well be dangerous to others.

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Police Call Media Over Scandal

Jakarta – Despite the fact that no complaint has been registered, the Jakarta City Police plan to call news media which have published articles on the alleged affair between Aryanti Sitepu and President Abdurrahman Wahid, known as 'Gus Dur'. One of the media to be summoned is detikcom, parent organisation of detikworld. Lukmanul Hakim/Fitri & LM, *Detikworld*, 2nd. September 2000.

Wimar: I'm Not Wahid's 'Mouthpiece'

Jakarta – Wimar Witoelar, a well known columnist and a public speaker, is so certain being appointed as the spokesperson for the Indonesian President, Abdurrahman Wahid. Wimar himself even boasted that Wahid's inner circles are currently formulating his job descriptions. However, Wimar announced that if he definitely secure this position, he won't be acting as the President's mouthpiece. The former chairman of Student Board at the Bandung Institute of Technology also said that he would not "restrict [the] President'[s] statements" either.

Presidential spokespersons are immediately in high demand after Wahid['s] advisors have expressed the importance of personal spokespersons to convey his messages. Their appointment also hope[s] to reduce the frequency of controversial blunders often said by Wahid.

Arifin Asydhad/Swastika & BI, *Detikworld*, September 21, 2000 (parentheses mine).

Small screen a big influence in RI

Jakarta – Many weary parents complain their offspring cannot be budged when their favorite programs are on television. Forget about getting some exercise, going to Sunday school or visiting friends and family.

"I feel so concerned that my children may be addicted to television," said Darwinsyah, a father of three sons. Nuraini, a housewife and mother of four, is also worried that a constant diet of TV may have a negative impact on her children's physical, emotional and intellectual development.

She has a point. A 30-year study done by the American Medical Association found "long-lasting" effects from children's exposure to violence in the media.

Viewing violence in shows on TV, as well as video and computer games, can lead to increased aggressive attitudes, values and behavior, particularly in children, the study said.

Rita A. Widiadana *Jakarta Post* August 27, 2000.

'Ketoprak Humor' sets the stage for laughs on television screens

Jakarta – Drawing on Javanese tales and myths, Ketoprak Humor (RCTI, 9:30 p.m., Saturdays) shows are the traditional vaudevillian theater of srimulat brought to the modern medium of television. They weave comic storylines which marry tradition with the world of Indonesia today, including the ups-and-downs in the lives of the performers…

The established team has been rounded out by the guest appearances of stars from Indonesian soap operas. They include Maudy Koesnadi, Dedy Yusuf, Donny Kusuma (the actor-model best known for the Extra Joss commercials), Anjasmara and his wife, Dian Nitami and even magician Deddy Corbuzier.

Some of the new crop of stars can go with the flow of the improvised storylines, but others fumble their way through their appearances.

"For srimulat, the actors need to be able to play off each other for the show to work," said Mulki, a chicken vendor and a fan of the program. "Some of the stars can do it, like Dian Nitami, and she is not even Javanese, but others are just there for the exposure. I mean, what is Deddy Corbuzier doing on the show? He's awful." *Jakarta Post* 3rd. September 2000.

We live in an ontologically crowded world. We are, it seems, all now part of localities, regions and nations, yet we are also united under conditions of ever-greater globalization. At the same time we are confidently told we are – or should be increasingly aware of being – differentiated by class, race and gender, as well as by religion, age, sexual preference and so forth. What holds us together in this maelstrom is our identities and culture. It may be a reassuring picture; but it is also a pretty desperate one. Where did all these things we are, belong to or are divided by come from? And what sort of things are they?[1] What, for instance, do you actually add to an analysis of people's practices by articulating these as identity or culture? Is the terminology of the postcolonial world (whatever that is, Schwarz 2000: 16-24) more than a sumptuous word salad?

Whatever we are, or are not, we seem to live in an ever more complexly mediated world. For example, many of the terms I listed above were given their current circulation through cultural studies, which began to extend rhizome-like to become media studies with the recognition that, at the turn of the millennium, culture is impossible without, and is inseparable from, the mass media. So what do the media actually do? Do they present or represent existing worlds? Do they conjure up imaginary and palliative ones? Are they means of persuasion, dissuasion, homogenization and control? And, in the context of this symposium, what is the relevance of a study of the media to Indonesians wishing to reform their polity and society after Suharto? What part, for instance, might the mass media play in forging such a world?

By way of a reply, I would argue that existing categories and questions are largely misplaced. The frame of reference is Eurocentric. It is also hegemonic, in the sense that its primary purpose is to articulate the antagonisms of contemporary American and European societies. It is not to provide a nuanced analysis of non-Western media, still less to consider how other people actually produce, read, watch and evaluate what is going on. I question how useful much current thinking about the media is to debate about the polities, economies and societies of Pacific Asia. And how subtle existing media studies approaches are as a way of inquiring into ideas, images, movement, voice, sound, music, narrative, language and their reception across a large and rapidly changing part of the world must be open to doubt.

For reasons of time, I shall confine myself to one theme, which is almost never mentioned, yet it provides a way of rethinking many of the issues. It is commentary. In particular I wish to consider commentary by the media on the media, what I shall call 'intermedia' commentary.

One way of phrasing the question that concerns me is: 'how do we know, say, what television viewers make of the programmes they watch?' This is the notoriously difficult question at the heart of audience research. Evading the issue by sophistry or by ignoring it does not mean you have overcome the problems. (Even political and economic approaches assume audiences respond, even if only to presuppose such response to be unproblematic.) The difficulty is we do not know what goes on inside viewers' heads. Indeed the image itself is far-fetched. And most ways of inquiring into what audiences make of what they watch is simplistic or particularistic. They reduce

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[1] They are not just labels, because we treat them as substantive. Philosophically 'substance' is not material. It may be 'objective forms', such as identity or globality, or mind, which in the human sciences we now call 'culture' (cf. Collingwood 1946: 42-45). Substantialism is now more often known as essentialism.

complex activities and practices to what theory or the analyst can cope with, then declare this to be generally the case.

In media and communication studies there is a very popular way of so doing. It is to seek determination in or through the content of programmes or, as it is revealingly known, the 'text'. If, the argument goes, we can establish the meaning of this text or its 'preferred reading', then we can dispense with the messy, contingent and complicated business of researching audiences. This is possible because their response is either determined by the meaning (or reading) or else is some version of a reaction against it. Quite simply, it is so much easier to do what academics do best – read texts – that even the romantic proponents of 'the active audience' retain the image of the text and its reading.

Both audiences and texts however are imaginary (but in rather different senses) and the product of social practices of commentary. Hartley makes a related point:

> audiences are not just constructs; they are…visible fictions… In no case is the audience 'real', or external to its discursive construction. There is no 'actual' audience that lies beyond its production as a category (1992: 105).

Unfortunately, for Hartley 'discursive' is effectively a synonym for 'textual', so text swallows audiences and we can get back to the work of studying texts.

The problem of text, famously, is the oscillation between its two senses. One Barthes called 'work', which 'is a fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books' (1977: 156-57). The other 'is a methodological field...*the Text is experienced only in an activity of production*' (1977: 157). The latter is of a still more complex logical order. It is of the order of possibility. It is not much help to media analysts to discover their objects of study (programmes, magazine articles etc.) are abstract fields of possibility. What is omitted in this discussion is the fact that people in the print media and academics spend much of their lives engaged in the practice of textualizing reality (Hobart 1999). By contrast, I would suggest both audiences and texts – but in different ways – are the outcome of innumerable acts of commentary, not just by academics (who are more marginal than they sometimes like to think), but, significantly, by the media industry itself.

My argument runs as follows. In order to show the importance of commentary, I have first to explain why media products themselves are not strong enough to determine how they are used and understood. As the closure round 'text' indicates however, for some reason we assume they do so. I therefore review the three main cases for determination. These are that media productions represent objective reality, that they contain an inherent meaning or that, if they lack intrinsic meaning, at the moment of encoding and transmission, ambiguity is cut out.

None of these arguments stands up to scrutiny. Instead media production is marked by ambiguity, contingency, openness, uncertainty and indeterminacy. The remarkable thing is that we should have concentrated on production, which, considered as practices, are minor in sheer number and prevalence compared to commentary.[2]

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[2] I am not overlooking Garnham's claim that cultural studies, unlike political economy, focuses on consumption (1998: 603ff.). The study of the social practices of consumption usually presupposes that there is meaning in what is consumed. Whether this is held to be introduced in the act of production or is retrospectively attributed is not germane for present purposes. The entire paraphernalia of interpretation, codes, culture etc. presupposes there to be a something that is interpreted.

Commentary however turns out to be a slippery animal.[3] Whether, when and to whom something is commentary is more open than might appear. One set of commentaries however appears to be rather more clear-cut: intermedia commentaries. I take up much of the paper with considering three kinds of intermedia commentary on recent Indonesian television before concluding with some problems with the idea of commentary – most obviously that there is too much of it. And this is not just because I use the term broadly. In the late 1960s the Straits Times in Singapore reported that on the golf course a Malay caddy, rooting around in the rough, picked up what he thought was the ball he was looking for. He pulled and out came a couple of metres of python's tail before its owner woke up. It took a great deal more work to pull out the rest, which turned out to belong to the largest python recorded in the Peninsula. Having seized on commentary, I think I know how the caddy felt.

Background to the argument

What are the conditions under which the media operate? Much has been written about the political economy and sociology of the media, as well as the analysis of their contents as texts. Each of these in different ways presupposes that there is something shared that enables the media to mediate, a shared code or culture. One point of this symposium, I take it, is to identify these media cultures. If culture is a way of talking about something, presumably there must be a something to be talked about. I am unhappy with this whole argument for all sorts of reasons.

Culture presupposes not only a significant degree of coherence and homogeneity (otherwise how do you know what fits and how?), but also there is some autonomous, superior outside knower, who recognizes that coherence where most participants cannot. What does not fit must be discarded. Unfortunately, that turns out to be almost everything of interest, including most of the practices that constitute that culture. At this point we are better off dispensing with culture and studying actual practices instead. This makes particularly good sense for the media where many scholars have tended to stress abstract and ambiguous notions like 'text'.

My concern here, however, is with the 'something' that is mediated. The efficacy of mediation depends upon there being closure. You need to have some idea of what the news, a film or an autobiography is about, in the sense of what it refers to, what the auteur meant or how the author wished you to understand her life. There may be others, but these are three important forms of closure. They are determination of meaning by virtue of objective reality, by the author's true intention and by the preferred reading

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[3] The difficulty is that commentary verges on being everything-that-is-not-text. Commentary has the following relevant senses according to the OED.

2. 'A treatise in explanation or exposition of some subject, as law or physic.'

3a. A treatise consisting of a systematic series of comments or annotations on the text of a literary work; an expository treatise following the order of the work explained.

3b. Anything that serves for exposition or illustration; a comment, remark; a *running commentary*.

3c. A description of some public event broadcast or televised as it happens; also, a description accompanying a cinema film or other exhibition, etc.

Commentary then is about explanation, exposition, illustration, annotation (often critical), remarks, description, etc. It covers a multitude of sins. At some point it would be useful to distinguish, say, commentary-as-criticism from commentary-as-notes-to-the-performance of something from its many other uses. I do not wish to lock myself into such closure at the moment. The crucial term is 'as', in a double sense. Rather than think of commentary as a *Ding an sich*, I prefer to consider how it is used. So commentary may act as criticism on an occasion, but equally criticism may act as a commentary.

the producers wish readers or viewers to have. In the first the media reflect reality more or less accurately. In the second they express the inner meaning of the work. In the last, the media encourage or oblige viewers or readers to interpret the text in a certain way that requires great effort to resist.

Against these three assumptions of closure, I shall argue that media practices are underdetermined. The reason that this is not obvious is because of a set of neglected practices: commentary. We do not simply hear, read or watch. There are innumerable media practices designed to convince us that what we see is real, what we hear is some revealed truth of which we have been ignorant or that this is the obvious, or only, way to understand the matter at hand. Indeed these practices often tell us when, how and what to watch. I am interested in these practices of determination, which for the moment I shall call 'commentary'. In a postscript, I outline the theoretical arguments against the three kinds of determination and reconsider procedures of discursive closure, using the work of Foucault. If you are not interested in the theory, I hope the brief argument below will suffice.

Perhaps the simplest way to address the closure of objectivity is through the problem of representation. Conventionally the media represent reality by providing some kind of correspondence, be this on radio words for actions or straight copying images as in televising a football match. The pragmatist response, succinctly stated by Nelson Goodman (1968), is that you can only represent something *as* something else. The only thing that represents something accurately is that something at exactly that moment in that place. All representation therefore requires changing whatever it is you represent into something else. In other words, by definition the media can *never* be faithfully objective. On the contrary, in varying degree and kind, mediation *transforms*.

The most familiar way of trying to get around this problem is by invoking some distinction between form and content. Representation is about revealing what lies behind appearances, be it in newspaper articles, broadcasts, films, web pages or whatever. This essence is usually known as 'meaning'. Now, the problems of meaning have been most intensively studied in hermeneutics, and centre on several key questions. How, for instance, do you determine the meaning of something? Is there one meaning, or many? How do you decide what the true or most likely meaning is? According to whom is there meaning and this meaning? The result, exemplified in much cultural studies, is to pick the meaning you fancy and hope you can run fast enough from the scene of the crime to get away with it. Anyway, how helpful is it to say that advertisements, magazines, TV programmes, bulletin boards or computer games are all about meaning, except in a trivial sense? A way out of the impasse is to ask about the circumstances under which people set about watching and interpreting. At that point interpretation emerges as a practice that varies greatly depending upon where, when and by whom it is done. Texts and meaning therefore tend to defer themselves into questions of structures of power and, potentially, practice.

This is the tack taken in the more sociological work, most obviously of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.[4] It addresses specifically the potential disjuncture between how producers wish viewers to take television programmes and how viewers interpret them. It is hybrid, as it melds remnants of the ideas of representation as a copy and meaning as the 'content' of programmes, with a

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[4] We have to be careful here because the literary turn in cultural studies pays lip service to power and practice before promptly returning to the safety of the text.

late Marxist analysis of different frameworks of knowledge, relations of production and so forth affecting how viewers respond to what they watch.

The argument goes that there is an entire industry devoted to structuring television programmes and other media productions. The aim is to ensure that only those meanings are encoded that the producers wish. It is usually left unclear whether the agents of production are those actually involved in newspapers, TV or whatever, the executives of large media corporations or late twentieth century capitalism itself. Culturally coded signs provide viewers with the 'preferred reading', so placing them in the *dominant-hegemonic* position. The only alternatives on offer are to *negotiate* a variant reading of the hegemonic one, or to be really awkward, class-conscious and emancipatory by making an *oppositional* reading against the grain (Hall 1993).

The virtue of this analysis is that it starts to open up the many stages of practices involved in the simplest media production. It highlights the conditions of production, distribution and reception. And it tries to distance itself (unsuccessfully) from mathematical or crudely mechanical ideas of transmission. However it retains the notion of meaning, and – being cultural studies – uses culture, here as code, to close down the ambiguities, ambivalences, incoherences and contingencies at each stage. The neat closure of the preferred reading and the idea that a programme is readable like a novel belie producers', and the few ethnographic, accounts of how production takes place. And who preferred that particular reading? It usually turns out to be an academic, who has probably never been in a television studio (except maybe as a speaker on a talk show) and only watches the programme for 'research'. The argument is useful in pointing to forms of technical, class and epistemological constraints that underpin media production and reception. It is a *gado-gado* of tasty-looking, but theoretically incompatible and indigestible, presuppositions.

While audience reception has usually been treated as pretty rocky, the text and closure around production has been the *terra firma* of media studies. It is an illusion. At best, to switch metaphors, it is the stability of a ship's deck – apparently solid only to those who happen to be standing on it. Except in this case, the ship has sailed into the stormy waters of non-Western media and the previous fixtures turn out to be loose cannons.

Commentary

If meaning is elusive – put another way, if 'the social always exceeds the limits of the attempts to constitute society (Laclau 1990: 91) – how come it appears so substantial? I suggest it is because we engage in practices which make it so. A fruitful activity in media studies has been analyzing how producers create, or try to create, closure in what they represent and so, to a degree, what viewers can make of programmes (e.g. Fiske 1987). The news is a good example (Fiske & Hartley 1978). Even such highly structured genres as news stories admit of all sorts of interpretations. (Indonesian, American and Australian news coverage of the doings of the multi-national force in Timor Lorosae differ significantly.) This is where commentary comes in. Commentaries comment on their subject matter. They frame what is going on, give you context or tell you which bits of context are relevant to understanding the facts, tell you what sort of facts they are, what you should rely on and what distrust – in short how to appreciate and respond to what is going on.

Media commentaries do more. They highlight what is the 'content' by focusing on it. For example, 'soft' news programmes tell you what matters in the 'hard' news,

which bits of the text to pay attention to, and even to start thinking of the news as text, not straight reporting. Other genres, such as readers' letters, phone-in programmes and so on tell you that you are a reader/listener/viewer and can become a different, more active and participatory kind of reader etc., by writing in, joining in at home or whatever. They invite you to think of yourself and to act as a certain kind of subject. By commenting, you become a subject (in all its many senses) of the media.

So what happened to the text: what the print article, the broadcast, the film is *really* about? By this stage, it starts to dawn that the idea of an ultimate meaning owes less to a critical analysis of media practice than it does to that other source of the ultimate: religion. Scholars and practitioners may strive to pin down media content and how it works on audiences from now till eternity. They cannot succeed because they are searching for a reality beyond, and prior to, experience. Like Divinity, it is transcendental. So what humans can know about it is, by definition, limited. You can consider media commentaries then as rites of determination. This is how we try to fix the ineffable, the Absolute. Commentaries are rites in the precise sense that they are public, recognized and, at any moment, fairly standardized occasions of pre-articulation. That is, what they articulate and how they do so (including what we often call 'genres') are not only assumed to be natural or normal, but are frameworks we use to constitute the natural and normal themselves. There is a mythology accompanying these rites, a diagnosis of which Roland Barthes outlined in *Mythologies*.[5]

Can we then provide a classification of kinds of commentary and their function? Elsewhere I have argued that doing so is less helpful than might appear (Hobart n.d.). This is because what constitutes commentary depends on the situations in which the act takes place and how it is appreciated, not only by those participating at the time, but also potentially by subsequent interested parties. A brief example will make the point. During the Bali Arts Festival in 1991 in a ballet spectacular, *Séndratari*, Pandawa Asrama, the *dalang* (narrator), speaking as the sage Begawan Biasa, advised the Pandawa brothers on how to be good rulers and warned of the consequences to them and their subjects of abuse of their position. People I knew would ask me if I had seen the episode, which they all took to be a withering indictment of President Suharto and the then Governor of Bali. However the *dalang* said nothing that was not entirely relevant to the unfolding of the narrative. There was no commentary as such. Any juxtaposition of the conduct proper to rulers in the Mahabharata and contemporary Indonesia lay with those viewing. In other words, what constitutes commentary lies in the relationship between an act of re-presentation and all the ways that this act comes to be appreciated subsequently.

Have I not carried my nominalism a bit far though? Even Foucault in *The Order of Discourse*, the relevance of which I discuss in the postscript, seems to have had a pretty clear idea what commentary is.

> By a paradox which it always displaces but never escapes, the commentary must say for the first time what has, nonetheless, already been said… Commentary exorcises the chance element of discourse by giving it its due: it allows us to say something other than the text itself, but on condition that it is this text itself which is said, and in a sense completed. The open multiplicity, the element of chance, are transferred, by the principle of commentary, from what might risk being said, on to the number, the

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[5] I make use below of several of the rhetorical devices of this bourgeois mythology, of which television is nowadays probably its most popular narrative site (Barthes 1972).

form, the mask, and the circumstances of the repetition. The new thing here lies not in what is said but in the event of its return (1981: 58).

Foucault however was explicitly referring to commentary *as* one of the main procedures of discursive closure (for details, see postscript). The result is displacement. Text anticipates commentary. While commentary might appear subsequent to text, it not only anticipates it, but it is commentary which is the necessary condition of text in the first place. Just think of the crucial rôle of previews in television magazines, which not only tell you how to understand what you will watch, but in so doing constitute the relevant 'text' and its reading as well as position you as a certain kind of viewer. Also, commentary promises something new, but always runs the risk of repeating itself, so recreating the familiar. It further displaces itself onto who is allowed to enunciate. In the *Séndratari* it was the *dalang*, but he in turn did not comment, strictly speaking. Commentary is marked by deferment.

Commenting (sic) on the kind of intensive coverage, or Mediathon,[6] in which the mass media now engage as in the Monica Lewinsky affair, Frank Rich (a former theatre critic for the New York Times) refers to O. J. Simpson's comments on his own ordeal by media.

> Simpson says he won't quarrel with 'anyone's opinion' about 'what the facts led to during the trail – I accept it whatever way it is'. He wants to defend the vanquished purity of the news: 'I never knew what Walter Cronkite thought about a story he was telling. Now, with an eyebrow and sarcastic kind of wiggles, you get commentary from the anchors' The age of the Mediathon. *The Observer Review*, 5th. November 2000.

There is no clearly discriminable class of phenomena then called commentary. Rather it is a complex set of practices involves a relationship between particular performers, performances, referents, audiences, occasions and purposes. It depends on a degree of (quite possibly falsely imputed) shared pre-understanding. Wittgenstein remarked; 'If a lion could talk, we could not understand him' (1958: 223). That has not stopped animal psychologists or philosophers from trying (see Hearne 1986).

Intermedia Commentary

As we first encounter it however, commentary seems unproblematic – except that there is so much of it. That the pervasiveness of commentary is not more obvious is because we tend to focus on what we imagine to be perduring substance, such as the meanings of texts or programmes, or the culture that informs them. Matters look very different if we consider the practices that constitute the daily work, for example, of producers, distributors, readers or viewers. Just as almost all organizations run on, and by means of, endless meetings, so the mass media consist in no small part of endless activities of commenting. From the moment someone first has an idea for a programme, a magazine article or series, they seek other people's comments; they produce treatments that explicitly invite commentary; they present the proposal to meetings for feedback. After that the process of production involves commentary at every stage from pre-production meetings to comments from all and sundry while

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[6] As Rich put it, in an article in journalism (The Observer Review 5th. November 2000):
  as grim and voyeuristic as the dance-endurance contests of the Depression and as redolent of cheesy showbiz piety as a televised Jerry Lewis charity binge, this new genre could be named the mediathon, a relentless hybrid of media circus, soap opera and tabloid).

shooting is taking place. Unless it is pretty unimportant, imagine a newspaper article, far less a television programme that is not subject to intensive in-house commentary at previews or whatever. Then there are all the post mortems and subsequent disinterments as occasions of emulation or warning. That we should have overlooked the central rôle of commentary in the media is testimony to our preoccupation with substance as against practice.

The point at which I wish to pick up commentary though is at the crucial time programmes are to be aired. Commentary might appear to follow the article or broadcast. Far from it. The more important (by whatever criteria) the piece, the more it is advertised, previewed and promoted. Every magazine about film and television contains many such previews, including intermedia pieces. The zenith of this is the Hollywood Blockbuster, such as the second Star Wars series, about which you can know an inordinate amount without ever proposing to go and see the film. Such commentary[7] is often distributed across different media, between which there are hierarchies. In many places, films are previewed, advertised and talked about, reviewed on television and radio, in newspapers and magazines and on the Internet. Films however encompass these other media mostly as subject matter, until, that is, films came increasingly to be delivered by television, video and the Internet. In practice, each medium has different relationships to the others in different countries at different times. What happens everywhere, it seems though, is that media spend a great deal of time commenting on themselves and one another. Welcome to the world of Intermedia.

As an example, let me turn to my opening quotations. They are taken deliberately from a single, somewhat mysterious source, a closed emailing list of press materials on Indonesia. Before we even begin, we have two media: newspaper and magazine articles delivered on the Internet.

In the first example (*Police Call Media Over Scandal*), we are thrown into a not-unfamiliar world of the imagined threat that the media pose when they write about anything politicians do not wish them to write about – in other words, almost everything. Here we meet commentary in its minimal form as 'objective' reportage. *Detikworld* apparently reports its police summons but, by noting another 'fact that no complaint has been registered', it is commenting upon police motives, and questioning them without ever needing to say so.

The second (*Wimar: I'm Not Wahid's 'Mouthpiece'*) is about the rambunctious personage of Wimar Witoelar, who started his television career with the politically confrontational – and subsequently banned – talk show *Perspektif*. We are in the cynical world of contemporary political 'spin'. After a dose of media commentators' bitchiness about other media commentators, the piece comments on the recurring issue of the degree to which the mass media determine the message and to which their 'spokespersons' are instruments. The article goes to some length to deny agency to the media, as reported, of course, in the media. Here a print medium is talking about a television personality becoming a political 'voice', drawing implicitly on shared assumptions about agency in the media.

In the third quotation (*Small screen a big influence in RI*), the media are explicitly self-reflective. A print medium delivered by internet, reports on the supposedly deleterious effects of a third medium, television, referring to two further media, as

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[7] I refer to it these various practices as commentary, not because I am imputing generic essence, but simply because each performance presupposes a 'text' or foundational performance.

reported in carefully selected live verbal commentary by 'ordinary people'.[8] 'Ordinary people', as usual, are agentive. That is they exist to enable, or require, articulation. An enunciator, so meticulously dated as to be timeless, promptly leaps forth, only to be rearticulated. Incidentally, this piece makes the important point that the gap between purely social scientific analysis and popular discussion in the mass media has partly collapsed. 'Expert' opinion and scholarly research have become the raw meat, or fair game, for media commentary.

The last extract (*'Ketoprak Humor' sets the stage for laughs on television screens*) again shows how media serially cross-refer to and rework each other. Dredging the originary substrate of 'Java', we come across tales and myths, reworked in theatre, re-reworked on television and finally reported in print in English. We have a redoubling: stars feature in episodes of Srimulat because they are already famous as media figures–not least for appearing in advertisements. Engagingly however, the article allows an ordinary person ('a chicken vendor and fan') to comment, under the controlled conditions of an encapsulating commentary. As if this were not enough, in a further intermedia cross-reference, there is a special series of programmes about *sinétron*, *Bulétin Sinétron*, the 21st of July 1999 edition of which showed scenes of shooting Ketoprak Humor.

As in many other countries in Pacific Asia, in Indonesia at the end of turn of the millenium, however important other media may be, television emerges as distinctive and has become the medium that other media find themselves commenting on, whether they like it or not. So what is so special about television?

Television is a content-free medium[9]

Intermedia commentary is then a vast topic. So I shall confine myself here to three examples. The first is *Bulétin Sinétron*, one of the more upmarket half-hour 'Infotainment' programmes (their own description of themselves) on RCTI.[10] The second is *Réaksi*, a half-hour satirical programme, much of which is devoted to send-ups of media genres and other programmes. Finally, I wish to consider briefly the response by different media to charges of press pornography in the summer of 1999.

Bulétin Sinetron

As the name suggests, the programme focuses on the broad genre of *sinétron*, which now seems to include not only television films but also any serial or series with

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[8] Is it coincidental that the man is allowed to speak directly, but the woman is only allowed indirect free speech? The addressees however are not-so-ordinary people, as the Jakarta Post is published in English.

[9] This wry remark was made by Nigel Barley, who is one of the few anthropologists to have made a successful career in broadcasting and the media. If television is the site *par excellence* for the recitation of bourgeois myths, it may account both for why it is so special and also content-free.

[10] By October 2000 a related genre had mushroomed, 'gossip' programmes. The *Jakarta Post* listed the following:

> Indosiar's Kisah Seputar Selebritis (KISS, Celebs' Stories, Tuesday, Friday, 4 p.m., Saturday, 9:30 a.m.), RCTI's C&R (Check and Recheck, Tuesday and Friday, 4 p.m.), TPI's GoShow (Gossip Show, Sunday, 9 a.m.) and Sisi Selebritis (Celebs' Side, Saturday, 3:30 p.m.), ANteve's Berita Selebritis (Betis, News on Celebs, Wednesday, 12:30 p.m.), Celeb on TV (Monday, 5:30 p.m. Tuesday, 12:30 p.m., and Panorama (Saturday,5:30 p.m., SCTV's Halo Selebritis (Hallo Celebs, Monday, Thursday 11 a.m.), Dunia Bintang (Star World, Tuesday, 11 a.m.) (Competition heats up celebrity news programs. *Jakarta Post*, 22nd. October 2000).

high production values. *Bulétin Sinétron* has a standard format, which consists of the following elements in order, punctuated by advertisements.

(Previews)	The presenter previews the main features. (This is followed by three breaks for advertisements, which are aimed at adults, apparently with a bias towards women).
Profil[11]	Focus on an 'artist'. The profile of some *sinétron* star. The scenes always show them in their expensive homes, with family and at work, almost always with their present partner and often with scenes of working out in gyms, by swimming pools or other 'leisure' activities. *Profil* is effectively a puff for the star concerned, who talks, carefully scripted, to camera. Even where the star has featured in the news, as with Yuyun Sukawaty (28.07.99) for getting on badly with the actor playing Jun (from the series *Jun dan Jin*), it is blandly reported and no questions are asked. As with most other items, voice-over takes up a half or more of the time.
Sorotan (spotlight)	Focus on some major media event, e.g. Festival Sinétron Indonesia (29.07.00) or the debate about pornography (21.07.99) sparked off by a number of models and actresses appearing in mainstream magazines in skimpy outfits or apparently nude. *Sorotan* is interesting because, despite the voice-over, the interviews are sometimes more extended and informative than in other parts of *Bulétin Sinétron* and other 'infotainment' programmes (the label *Bulétin Sinétron* uses of itself). In all the episodes I have watched, it is the women who often come across as highly articulate and critical, and the men mostly as bimbos.
Aksi Lokasi	A short behind-the-scenes feature on filming major *sinétron* series, sometimes with brief interviews, very much in promotional mode.
Bincang Bintang (Star Chit-Chat)	Just what is says. The questions have evidently been rehearsed beforehand and we get to see one or two stars as they wish to be seen. It differs from *Profil* in being focused upon particular recent events and often features several stars (e.g. 04.08.99 features Ayuni Sukarman, who dislocated her shoulder while shooting a *silat* (martial arts) scene).
Kilas Sinétron (A Peek at Sinétron)	Mostly brief previews of forthcoming series, usually soaps, on RCTI. Sometimes clips of festivals or parties.
Dibuang Sayang (Treasured Off-Cuts, Bloopers)	Scenes from sinétron where the actors broke down in laughter during a scene (i.e. corpsed). These can be quite effective when we see the actors crack up while playing tearful or tragic scenes. The penchant for using such scenes as background to the final credits in Action Series (borrowed it seems from the Jackie Chan films) sets up a fascinating dissonance with the intensity of the *sinétron* which has just preceded it.
Klip Music	A popular song by a leading singer with good production values. *This is overlaid by*
SRI Rating	AC Nielson Indonesia audience ratings, usually for different kinds for RCTI programmes.
(Conclusion)	The presenter concludes, usually with some remark about how popular the programme is. There are not usually previews of the following week.

The rigorous use of a standardized format, the extensive use of voice-over and the machine-gun speed of the presenter all serve to avoid surprises, far less give the viewers time to think. We know in anticipation each week what sort of item will fill each slot. Although about half the time items in the interview (*Profil* and *Bincang*

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[11] Except for the English in brackets, which designate unnamed items, these are the named sections of the programme.

Bintang) consist of interviewees speaking, the voice-over, together with the editing, ensures that what the stars say and what is presented to viewers is tightly controlled. The voice-over throughout is strongly reminiscent of state television news' broadcasts (Kitley 2000: 189-198). It frames the images and speech of interviewees to enunciate what is going on and how we are supposed to understand it.

In other words, the presenter and the voice-over constantly strive

> to claw back into a central focus the subject of its messages. This inevitably means that some features of the subject are emphasized rather than others… If a subject *cannot* be clawed back into a socio-central position the audience is left with the conclusion that some point in their culture's response to reality is inadequate (Fiske & Hartley 1978: 87).

Fiske and Hartley developed the idea of clawback as part of a model of how television works by making itself a cultural mediator

> who composes out of the available linguistic resources of the culture a series of consciously structured messages which serve to communicate to the members of that culture a confirming, reinforcing version of themselves (1978: 85-6).

Items like *Profil* and *Bincang Bintang* are supposed to reconfirm a world order to viewers and their place in it. If culture is mediated, through such tight conventions of representation, the media (re-)acculturate people. Interposed between these anodyne and largely predictable sections are others, where actresses and women artists (*artis*) provide thoughtful, and often insightful and critical, comments that potentially challenge the assumptions of the spectacle of which they are part. This is where the point of clawback becomes clearer. For it

> is the process by which potentially disruptive events are mediated into the dominant value system without losing their authenticity. This authenticity guarantees the 'truth' of the interpretation that this mediating involves and this allows, paradoxically, that which has been interpreted to present itself as objective. Objectivity is the 'unauthored' voice of the bourgeoisie (Fiske 1987: 289).

On this account, the whole issue of media reform in Indonesia may be largely beside the point. It is just bringing media culture up to date with the changing, but still unauthored, voice of the bourgeoisie.

This analysis is not quite adequate though. Fiske and Hartley were writing with the news in mind. Is it that clawback works less well for discussions? Or that some members of the television production teams involved in shooting, interviewing for and editing items like *Sorotan* manage on occasion to evade clawback? The predilection for bloopers (*Dibuang sayang*), among producers and, in my experience, viewers, suggests we need to be careful in applying media theory worked out for Western Europe and the United States wholesale to the rest of the world.

As someone brought up on European television, I found something deliciously unsettling over the credits at the end of a particularly dramatic action series in watching the 'baddie' rush to pick up the 'hero' after the climactic martial arts' sequence went wrong. Just as disturbing is seeing the mother-in-law, the splendid villain of the soap, *Bidadari yang Terluka* (Wounded Angel), fall about laughing when she muffs particularly venomous lines. And where else might you find the crucial scenes of the heroine's car crashing into the sea in flames (after skulduggery by the same mother-in-law) and her need for drastic plastic surgery being mocked (she wants a face like Donald Duck!) in an edition of *Réaksi* (see below) several days **before** the episode of

the soap is broadcast? It suggests that Indonesians do not share Euro-American presuppositions about realism in television, perhaps because their background in popular theatre makes them more sensitive to how realism is constructed. At the same time, programmes like *Bulétin Sinétron* attempt to overdetermine both the media text and their audiences.

Réaksi[12]

From the opening shots – a fuse burning, a road packed with traffic in central Jakarta undulating – it is clear that *Réaksi* aims at a different kind of media commentary. Many items are regular, but there is significant variation. So let me outline one broadcast (07.08.99).

(Opening)	A male and female presenter start conventionally sitting on a large red couch talking to camera. However it turns out they are arguing about his eye for other women. A pretty woman walks across the set, upon which a fight ensues.
Kenapa Begini, Kenapa Begitu?	(Why's it like this? Why's it like that?) A regular item with the question posed in a child's voice. The week's question is: Why do people fall in love? A grave voice explains that God created men and women (screen split in two between a young man and young woman) – and trans-sexuals (*bancih*, the screen a heavily bearded man with a handbag). To a second question: 'How do you fall in love?' the voice-over continues in clawback mode set against deliberately inappropriate out-takes from sinétron and other programmes, which send up the whole theme.
Advertisements	When funding permits, *Réaksi* specializes in comic refilming of well-known Ads. For the first few seconds it is not clear whether these are genuine items paid for by advertisers or send-ups.
(Unspecified item)	— Five Indonesian spacemen appear to serious music with the caption ARMAGEDDON. (A take off of the Hollywood film)
	— Imitating the many kiddie-song programmes, a child sings about how she would like the stars to come down to earth. Promptly we have scenes of mayhem and mass destruction.
	— Cut away to a gantry and a song by construction workers, with the foreman singing that if they don't work harder and finish quickly they won't get paid or eat. An Indonesian army officer arrives who announces he is from the U. S. A. He is an *ahli menggali,* drilling expert, who has brought them a mission.
	— A complete break to a couple who mime a love song on the grass beside a roundabout. She prepares to say goodbye to him, as he has to go on a mission.
	-The Indonesian space agency NAAS. To the tune of 'Kiss me and smile for me', sung by the girlfriend of the man in the previous scene, now one of five astronauts prepare, in the words of the song, 'to go on a jet plane'. After boy and girlfriend say a protracted goodbye and he gets caught in the lift doors, the astronauts finally manage to get into the lift to take them to lift-off. There are shots in serious mood of waiting for countdown, which are broken off abruptly because the

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[12] The director of *Réaksi*, Drs Helmy Adam, worked previously with Septian Dwicahyo, the director of another Star Vision comedy series, *Spontan*. (Wawancara Gaya Humor Dalam "Reaksi" *Suara Pembaruan Daily* 21.5.98).

crew have to 'Selametan Dulu' (first perform a '*slametan*', a ceremony to avoid misfortune, iconic of Javanese) to ensure the success of the mission and to fill their stomachs. (The large East Indonesian in the crew eats with his left hand.) The Armageddon Team is checked before entering their rocket using a hand-held airport scanner below an alarm signalling: Nepotism, Collusion, Corruption. They are all clean, but a military-looking official who follows sets off the alarm sign for CORRUPTION. As the astronauts proceed to the rocket (again) they sing about a fair and honest General Election. In the next shot, they are seen in a walkway over a main road in a shopping complex and, armed with their purchases, they head up staircases to their rocket, appealing to the revolutionary spirit of 1945. After stock shots of rockets taking off, the astronauts are finally seen standing round a computer monitor, where they are looking over the shoulders of three small boys who are playing a computer game of Armageddon, which ends in Game Over.

Cék & Blong   (The title seems to be a play on other programmes, like Cék & Recék.) This item analyzes situations on screen as if they were for real. In the first, they ask why Ria Irawan, a famous and very highly paid actress (the heroine in Bidadari yang Terluka), cannot afford to pay for a taxi fare? A clip follows this from a sinétron scene of her discovering she has no money and giving her necklace and earrings to an unhappy taxi-driver. At its best this is delightful and effective, creative montage.

Sekilat Info (News flash)[13]   Against a background of 'ordinary people' eyeing food hungrily, a grave voice-over announces a problem has arisen as a result of the monetary crisis. Deprivation is affecting people's *lahir* and *batin*. (This is a reference to the Javanese metaphysical connection

between outer behaviour and inner feeling.) We see a man collapsing in the street in different situations. The same voice-over announces

	that it is the government's responsibility to provide a solution.
Adegan salah (Bloopers)	*Réaksi*'s selection of bloopers, which include more items from comedies than does *Bulétin Sinétron*. Physical gestures are highlighted by multiple rapid replay.
(Closing)	The woman presenter alone on a couch decides (in a play on the over-use of special effects in *sinétron*) to transform herself to look like her rival. Her counterpart enters and, discovering his co-presenter absent, comes on strong, upon which the presenter turns back into her original appearance. They fight as the closing credits roll.

Like *Bulétin Sinetron* and other programmes about the media, *Réaksi* uses set pieces, such as the presenters sitting on a couch talking to camera, clips from *sinétron* and extensive voice-over. Whereas in the former, commentary is used to direct how imagined viewers are to appreciate what is presented, the commentary in *Réaksi* eschews this closure.

For example, instead of providing a presence – of framing or even managing to announce the programme's main features – the presenters appear stripped of authority and preoccupied with personal squabbles.

The theme is developed in the next sketch. This uses continuous and didactic voice-over, which answers, with great gravitas, questions posed by an exaggeratedly childish voice. It is also juxtaposed against clips of inconsequential or burlesque images. The effect is dissonant or simply ridiculous. At once it exposes for scrutiny the pedagogic or enunciative function of such voice-over and, by exaggeration, to highlight its potential rôle of infantilizing viewers.

Likewise, by taking clips from *sinétron* and treating them as if they were continuous with life, the effect is to spotlight not only the constructed nature of television reality, but also the manufactured nature of the authenticity of the images themselves. This item was followed by a short skit on a serious political theme, the widespread shortages of food and even starvation due to the monetary crisis. The announcement that the government must find a solution, when had proven manifestly unable to, places a question mark over the authority of the authorities themselves.

The main item however is the Indonesian version of the film *Armageddo*n. You can take it as a light-hearted pastiche of all sorts of elements in Indonesian media, from children's programmes to pop songs and laboured action series with poor production values. Alternatively, you can interpret it as a darker, more critical exploration of what lies behind smart appearances and clothes (the astronauts' *pakaian kerén* in the song) – the foreman reminding the oil-drillers they do not get fed if they don't work hard, or digs at corruption in the armed forces (What is important is to be clean…of nepotism, collusion and corruption (*Yang penting bersih…Dari nepotisme, kolusi, korupsi*). In a sense *Réaksi* is a commentary on commentary as rites of determination.

The pornography debate

In 1999, between the General Election and the Electoral College meeting to decide Suharto's successor, it might have appeared a trifle odd, granted the febrile political atmosphere of Indonesia, that the issue of pornography in the media should have taken up so much time, attention and media commentary. The story itself kept changing under the sheer weight of subsequent commentary from demonstrations by Muslim women, to endless newspaper and magazine editorials, to features in infotainment and showbiz gossip shows, and discussion on web sites and in chat rooms. As I understand

it, having arrived in the middle of a long-running argument, the focus of attention was the appearance of a number of photographic models, some well known, appearing relatively undressed on the covers of mass circulation magazines. This coincided with a period of relative liberalization and expansion of the press after years of pretty unrelenting repression. It also coincided with a series of exposés, primarily in the press, of instances of corruption under the Suharto régime represented as of such mind-blowing scale as to equal Indonesia's entire foreign debt.

From the large array of somewhat scantily clad models in magazines across the entire market, a few became the focus of media attention. Perhaps because she was half-German and born in Germany; perhaps because she posed for a fairly up-market magazine, Matra, not associated with pin-ups; perhaps because the offending photograph (an advertisement for an invisible swimsuit) is visually striking; perhaps because she seemed singularly unperturbed by the whole furore; in any event the fashion model and sometime actress, Sophia Latjuba, emerged as iconic. The photo has been reproduced endlessly, it became available on the web through the magazine Popular (from *Popular* webpage May 1999) and few editorials or infotainment programmes seemed able to avoid mentioning her. Sensibly perhaps, at the height of the excitement, she left for a vacation in Germany.

A feature of the public argument over pornography is that commentary overwhelmed what it was ostensibly commenting on and the original images and issues soon became largely lost in the ensuing Mediathon. Whatever it was about, as several of the models involved were quick to note, these photographs had little or nothing to do with the hard— and soft-core pornography abundantly available on video and CDs on many city street corners and on the websites in Indonesia. Almost every antagonism suppressed under the New Order burst out. The themes I wish to address though have little to do with the ostensible divisions of religion, gender, class, generation, life style and so on.

Some of the models were summoned to Regional Police Headquarters to be questioned, mostly it turned out as witnesses (as formally was the case with Sophia Latjuba) – of what was not always entirely clear. As a poster for the RCTI infotainment programme, Cek & Recek, had it: *Artis bugil mulai diburu polisi* – Nude artists begin to be harassed by police. After 32 years of the police being able effectively to harass whom they liked with impunity, it may have come as something of a surprise that anything they did had become fair game for media commentary. While the police were 'harassing' fashion models and editors, the media were starting to harass the police over their harassment.

Several points struck me in television interviews with fashion models and actresses, who were caught up in the imbroglio. Most came across as highly articulate, clear about the various pressures involved and disdainful of attempts to conflate hard core pornography with up-market, artistic work.[14] Almost by mutual agreement though
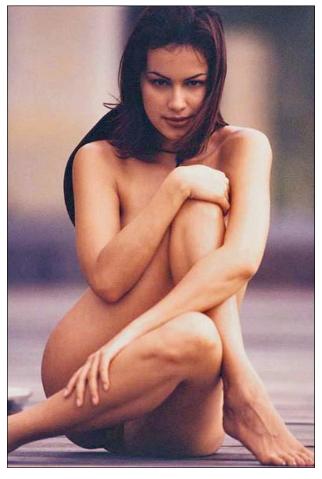
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[14] S*eni* (artistic) was a much repeated word, its antonyms here being *bugil* (stark naked), *vulgar* or plain pornographic. Curiously I did not often come across *cabul*, obscene, in either television or print coverage. The two instances in print are an article in the Army-run daily in Bali, Nusa Tenggara, under the title *Porno Masuk Bali: Sulit Redam Barang Porno Masuk Bali* (Porno enters Bali: difficult to suppress porno entering Bali). In the first youth is taken as the market for obscene pictures and films, and in the second there is a passing reference in an article on the model Krisdayanti in the same newspaper. While there were pornographic images circulating on the net of actresses, including Krisdayanti, granted

on television, unlike the print media, it is my impression that many of the main points of antagonism –secularism, modernity, brutality– were avoided by all sides.[15] Against this, on the occasions that the police or ministers actually spoke, they often did so as if they were dealing with unruly children. The gap between their black-and-white vision and the complexity of the accounts of the models, editors and commentators, each different, was my perduring impression.

An unremarked feature of the hounding of a small number of models is that the two primary targets, Inneke Koesherawati and Sophia Latjuba, among others (including Paquita Wijaya and Karina Suwandi) had previously been at the forefront of AIDS awareness campaigns (Inneke Koesherawati "Nggak Rela Dapat Gelar Itu" *Tempo Interaktif* 01 – 04 January 1997). It is hard not to draw the conclusion that not only is it easy to tar people involved in such campaigns, but it must be unsettling to some people to find 'beautiful' women proving to be not only intelligent and articulate, but active as well.

A recurring theme was the fact of being summoned to police headquarters ran through articles, TV features and interviews alike. It was repeated so often that I suspect it is redolent of implications of the rôle of police stations in the imagination of many Indonesians. The horror of the kind of mindless brutality and stupidity involved at its nadir has recently been highlighted in Garin Nugroho's film, *Puisi Tak Terkuburkan* ('Poetry they couldn't bury'). And another story widely circulated in the media was the implied abuse, or even rape, by the police of the leading *sinétron* actress, Ria Irawan, after a guest at her house succumbed to a drug's overdose. Police stations are not the sort of place you look forward to being summoned to.

As some of the models made abundantly clear, the outrage over press pornography involved all sorts of displacements. As the editor of a new paper, the Denpasar Post,

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how easy digital editing of photographs is, questions of authenticity and provenance meld into issues of how to write about simulacra and hyperreality.

[15] An exception was an interview with Hj. Tutty Alawiyah AS, the Minister for Women in the Hababie government, who argued a forceful 'traditional' Muslim women's line. There is an interesting analysis to be done contrasting what print and television do and how they represented the pornography debate (Ellis 1992).

made clear, the timing of public outrage over erotic images in up-market magazines was singularly convenient.

> It is really ridiculous that dozens of journalists wait for hours on end for Inneke Koesherawati to arrive at Police Headquarters. In the meantime, the cases of Suharto, Tommy, Tutut and Andi Ghalib disappear from circulation. Who know who was being clever in this 'game', but this is a reflection on society with political nuances, which uses press pornography as a vehicle (Chusmeru: Sebuah Refleksi Sosial. Editorial in *Denpasar Post* 15/16 July 1999).[16]

In other words, the media seemed to play straight into the hands of old strategists and to do their work for them. The ploy worked in another way too. Articles that began by condemning pornography invariably moved on to propose the need for the re-introduction of censorship, i.e. political censorship. That summer, it became a game of seeing how many column inches the author could hold out before calling for stricter surveillance. Commentary, as rites of determination, may determine their object indirectly and by displacement.

Problems of commentary

Commentary, it seems, is crucial to the analysis of the mass media. And intermedia commentary emerges as central to the three forms of determination that I briefly outlined earlier. While print media appear more informative, this is partly because of our preoccupation with the propositional power of words. As Balinese say, words can lie as easily as tell the truth. Television images of the famous photo of Sophia Latjuba accompanied by her and other models talking about the matter had a reality for the Balinese viewers with whom I talked that print simply does not have. Here the interviews serve to make what happens seem singularly real, even though as we saw, whatever the pornography debate was about, it was not about what it seemed.

Similarly the use of voice-over provides the officially correct interpretation of what is going on. (Clawback attempts to override the voices that we have heard, themselves already edited.) Voice-over is a powerful means of aiming at closure, because it directly proffers the preferred meaning. We are not left in much doubt as to how the programme makers wish us to understand what they have in mind. I say 'not much doubt', because programmes are not unitary essences, nor are the makers simple agents. It is often harder to edit the images as tightly as it is voice-over. So viewers have access to ways of rethinking the programmes through the disjunctures. Programmes are made by teams, in other words by complex agents (Hobart 1990; Inden 1990). So camera crews, editors and others are often each working with somewhat different ideas of how they wish the programme to be. Closure is rarely, if ever, complete.

Although commentary often serves to close down interpretive possibility, it may do the opposite. This applies not only to highbrow print media, but to relatively inexpensive fanzines.

> The public have responded to Sophie's summons by the police in all sorts of ways. There are those who have treated it as fabrication, politicization. Aren't there many

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[16] Sungguh menggelikan, puluhan wartawan menunggu berjam-jam kedatangan Inneke Koesherawati di Mabes Polri. Sementara kasus Suharto, Tommy, Tutut, dan Andi Ghalib hilang dari peredaran. Entah siapa yang pintar dalam "permainan" ini; tetapi inilah refleksi sosial yang bernuansa politis dengan kendaraan pornografi pers.

other major cases that are more important? But there is no small number who think the opposite. If you allow the distribution of eye-catching pictures – according to them – it endangers the younger generation. Article on Sophia Latjuba *Bintang Indonesia* 30.6.99.[17]

We are offered two distinct interpretations of police intervention. Against this, commentary provides other kinds of closure. Who, for instance, is this public? According to whom? On what evidence are these assertions made? People do not usually wander round with unambiguous and situationally invariable responses to particular television programmes in their heads, any more than they hold doggedly to unalterable views on police action. The vociferous and dogmatic however make for easy viewing, listening or reading, and save directors for having to condense often-complex arguments.

Even when viewers seem to go along with preferred readings, what does that actually tell us? When I watched several episodes of *Réaksi* with viewers in Bali, for the most part they simply enjoyed the jokes. When I asked whether they thought the kinds of themes to which I alluded above were there, they agreed you could take it that way, but they had not bothered until I pointed it out. What does it meant to say that viewers had a clear reading, far less a preferred one?

Interviews with the producers are not always revealing. They know better than anyone does the transformability of the media. Anyway, you would hardly expect them to give away the secrets of success they harbour for a pet programme.[18] A problem of commentary is that academic analysis is open to the same sorts of criticisms of overinterpretation, closure and hegemony as are the voice-overs, the previews, reviews and other commentaries that Indonesians themselves are making.

In theory, I suppose you could do a classification of kinds of commentary and their distribution across media. However this assumes they possess some kind of generic essence independent of the circumstances in which they are appreciated and used. Most academics assume that what is written is superior. So 'text' has become a pernicious synecdoche for all media content. The argument applies in spades to commentary, which is usually imagined as purely verbal.[19] Against 'textualization' or any other over-interpretation, I would argue that you should not speak *a priori* about any particular relationship between the media, but must examine how it works in practice.

In India, for example, cinema film occupies a very important place within the media, with endless television and radio programmes devoted to clips, songs and stars, quite apart from coverage in magazines and fanzines. In Indonesia, film is far less important or popular. If one medium receives the most intermedia attention, it is now probably television, especially perhaps *sinétron*. By contrast, in Britain, you could argue that it is the tabloid press that occupies a privileged place. In the last decade,

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[17] Pemanggilan Sophie oleh polisi disikapi beraneka ragam oleh publik. Ada yang menyebut itu mengada-ada, dipolitisir. Bukankah masih banyak kasus-kasus besar yang lebih penting? Tapi tak sedikit pula yang berpendapat sebaliknya. Kalau dibiarkan penyeberan gambar-gambar seronok – menurut mereka – membahayakan generasi muda (Sophia Latjuba *Bintang Indonesia* 30.6.99).

[18] An example is an interview with the producers of Réaksi, where they focus on how they came upon how they got different items to work ("Reaksi" Ajak Pemirsa Berpartisipasi. *Suara Pembaruan Daily* 6.3.98; Wawancara Gaya Humor Dalam "Reaksi" *Suara Pembaruan Daily* 21.5.98). Once again, the intermedia element is to the fore. These interviews consist of the producers commenting on the programme in a daily evening newspaper available on-line.

[19] The OED definition of comment and commentary takes it for granted that these are textual, indeed verbal, practices.

television and radio have often had to follow and report on the political agenda being forged by the tabloids (notably the xenophobic Murdoch papers, the Sun and News of the World, and the Daily and Sunday Mail, which are still further to the right). The Labour Government over the last few years has in effect decided policy significantly in the light of tabloid headlines and editorials.

Several important points follow. The media are positioned differently in relation to one another in different countries. This affects how intermedia commentary works in any instance. Conventional universalized accounts of the media therefore essentialize and reify one version –mostly North American or British – and impose it on everyone else. First, how we approach other people's media almost always involves massive pre-interpretation.[20] Second, media scholars tend to homogenize and universalize the media and then complain about Media Imperialism! This is not dewesternizing the media at all (*pace* Curran & Park 2000), but a highly élitist, metropolitan ploy to hierarchize practice. We need a critical, indeed sceptical, analysis of the pseudo-phenomenon of World Media.[21]

The idea of dewesternizing the media is a neat instance of hegemony. It presupposes they were western in the first place. Is there supposed to be some substance 'the media' that accompanies technology? If so, should it not now perhaps be Japanese? That the problems are not more obvious is because media studies scholars are hoist on their own concept of inoculation.

> One immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil [or Otherness]; one thus protects it against the risk of a generalized subversion (Barthes 1972: 150; my parentheses).[22]

Media studies scholars still seem to imagine that if someone has studied the phenomenon of *Telenovelas* or a sample of advertisements from other countries, they have inoculated themselves against the sheer diversity of media practice.

In other words, intermedia commentary becomes submerged under scholarly articulations about the media-in-general. So media studies' commentaries themselves emerge as antithetical to, and even hegemonic over, the plethora of commentaries in which particular media productions comment on, imitate, associate themselves with, dispute, denigrate, argue with, or distance themselves from other media productions and practices.[23] Instead of imagining culture as some mysterious entity that permeates

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[20] I would argue that the media are constitutive of public life in the United States in a way that they are not, even today, in Britain, where the governing élite communicates among itself, as if it were still running an empire. And the mass media remain on sufferance, however powerful they may be. The ideas in this section in particular, as well as rites as modes of pre-articulation, are the product of a complex agent. They have been worked out in conversations with Ron Inden over the last years.

[21] There is a parallel to World Cinema studies, which universalizes ideas of class, power, human nature and the human predicament, and ignores most popular cinema across the world in order to single out a few brilliant minds among art house directors, whose world vision fortuitously coincides with the equally brilliant minds of a few metropolitan scholars. Proponents of World Cinema, like Paul Willemen, are caught in such deep transcendentalism that they do not even have to have to know the language or the 'culture' to appreciate film as art.

[22] An example is allowing radical voices into programmes, which are nominated and then clawed back. The models interviewed about pornography serve this function.

[23] You can make a similar point about the relationship of different genres as well as of different media. Which genres, for example, are supposed to carry information, which commentary, which criticism? And which are construed as providing different kinds of commentary on other genres, and the idea of genre itself?

the media in some uniform or coherent way, it simply is these practices of articulation, which have gone largely unnoticed and unstudied. We have no ground however to assume these practices form any consistent whole or that, by studying one genre, we have a captured a media culture. And the idea that expert commentary somehow stands above and beyond its object merely reiterates the hierarchical dichotomy between the knower and the known. It ensures that all those commentaries, through which people engage with the media, be it as producers, distributors, readers, viewers or commentators, remain elusive.

> What of those other commentaries to which Foucault alluded? He contrasted those which are said in the ordinary course of days and exchanges, and which vanish as soon as they have been pronounced; and those which give rise to a certain number of new speech acts, which take them up, transform them or speak of them (1981: 56-57).

We need to distinguish what Foucault was arguing from a similar-looking argument.

> In living speech, the instance of discourse has the character of a fleeting event. The event appears and disappears. That is why there is a problem of fixation, of inscription. What we want to fix is what disappears (Ricoeur 1981: 198).

Ricoeur imagined discourse as evanescent. It is not an object of study nor interpretable until it has been inscribed in words, action, ritual, by which objective meaning becomes detached from the subjective – and so transitory, contingent, socially unimportant – meaning individuals may attach to it. The analyst wants to fix discourse. For Foucault that was impossible. The issue is pragmatic. It is about distinguishing between those casual remarks that have no effect because nobody takes them up and those remarks which people in the society in question respond and react to and engage with. Commentary is as commentary does.

In this sense intermedia commentary is part of a gigantic flux of commentaries, even if a singularly important part. At this point we need to ask what is the relationship between the media, intermedia commentary and this endlessly running, ever-changing, cacophonous chorus of everyday commentary? Once again you cannot give an answer *a priori*. We are pitched into the world of intermedia commentaries, which set out to provide or, more rarely, challenge preferred readings or whatever.

Surrounding, and woven through, these intermedia commentaries are all the things that people say about what the last episode of their favourite soap, or what they read in the papers the other day. And do you trust a word of what you read, or what the Minister had to say last night on TV? Already we are pitched into a heterotelic world.[24] In a village family with whom I used to work, father and son would both watch the news. The son was a middle school teacher, who listened with careful attention to the frequent ministerial pronouncements under the New Order régime. These defined his world and he became rather confused during the reform period. His father by contrast derived great satisfaction from telling everyone what he thought was behind the unctuous phrases and laughed out loud at the verbal inanities of incompetent ministers.

Here we reach the problem of the superabundance of commentary. The knee jerk response is to eliminate almost everything that is going on, by declaring that what is inscribed, the preferred reading or whatever is what really matters. Then you set busily about proving it. It is slightly like going on a gastronomic tour of France and gorging

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[24] That is a world of divergent and incommensurable aims and purposes.

yourself on baked beans and Coca-Cola. Of the morass of commentary, I think three kinds deserve further attention. These are the commentaries of media producers as part of production practices. Then there are intermedia commentaries. Finally there are readers' or viewers' commentaries as part of engaging with how they are imagined, or imagine themselves – as agents, subjects or objects – in the media and how they rework themselves and their ideas about the media in response. What is remarkable about media studies, especially outside the English-speaking world, is how little we know and how inadequate existing approaches are. Once you leave the safety of *a priori* disciplinary certainties, not only does media studies start to roll and ship water, but the established concepts and methods come unfixed and slither around the deck like so many loose canons.

Theoretical postscript for the really determined

Media studies, as a development of cultural studies, is inevitably caught up in the defining issue of the human sciences or *Geisteswissenschaften*, namely *Geist* or mind. The question arises of what the media and media industries do to people, and what people do to themselves and their lives with and through the media. In the context of the present argument, we may treat this question as one of determination or closure. I shall reconsider two issues. The first is how we determine what the media are about. The second is how we decide upon the significance or meaning of media productions.

Closing down while opening up

In his inaugural lecture to the Collège de France, *The order of discourse*, Foucault considered the forms of closure at work in European discourse. Unlike much cultural and media studies, which still universalize highly historically and culturally specific assumptions, Foucault was sketching out his 'genealogical' method (1977a, 1977b). This consisted of tracing the discursive practices that delimit a field of objects. For example, who may act as a subject of knowledge? And how do we go about thinking and representing that knowledge?

Foucault's starting point was that

> in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality (1981: 52).

As the media are crucial to this 'production of discourse', what were the procedures deployed, say, under the New Order? And how much has changed? Again, following Foucault, I am thinking less of explicit institutional modes of control like legislation or censorship than of largely unnoticed practices. As they are largely unnoticed, I am sure I have missed many.

Foucault identified four kinds of procedures. The first was external procedures of exclusion. They determine what you cannot say and who is strictly excluded from speaking. Foucault proposed complexes that excluded people according to sexuality and politics[25], madness, as well as ideas of truth and falsity, and so who was qualified

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[25] Evidently for Indonesia, this includes not just communism, but most critical political thinking. This makes sense if, as Adrian Vickers has argued, the New Order was a 'criminal state'.

to speak about what (1981: 52-56). The difficulty with media under the New Order is that its insistence upon hierarchizing merged into marginalizing or effectively excluding so many groups of people. Apart from those mentioned by Foucault, among exclusions, in a strong sense, which come to mind are those around religion and its negation, a-theism.

There are however two important exclusions from participation or representation in the media. It is not immediately obvious because members of the excluded categories were visible. However they were spoken for and were rarely permitted to speak for themselves. Even when they did, they were clawed back. Typically they were given set speeches to recite or they were silenced through voice-over. The most blatant exclusions seem to me to be children and the poor. (The ways in which women have been marginalized is a major topic in itself, even where it does not overlap with other exclusions[26]). Children are represented and spoken for, whether in advertisements or singing competitions, what children say and do is scripted and pre-articulated.[27] It is fascinating the multiple ways the poor are excluded or stereotyped (a form of exclusion, for example as 'the masses', as in such expressions as '*rakyat yang masih bodoh*'[28]). Just to take television, for years in a country where most people are poor, only one series really seemed to touch on their lives, *Si Doel Anak Sekolahan*[29]. That it consistently topped viewer ratings is interesting.

As Philip Kitley pointed out, state television, TVRI, news broadcasts were rites of hierarchy. For

> the TVRI structure keeps the control and mediation of the news as much in the hands, voices, and presence of the newsmakers as possible (over half of whom were state officials) (2000: 190).

The disarticulation is made explicit in the favoured report (*Laporan*) form, in which

> the viewer, however, has no access to the actual words spoken, as all details of the event are relayed in voice-over by the news presenter (2000: 194).

In other genres, like development documentaries, the poor speak only to confirm that they are not allowed to speak.[30]

The undermining of all legitimacy for the institutions of "law" (i.e. the security apparatus, the police and the judiciary) meant that the New Order security state was more accurately termed a criminal state (n.d. 5).

[26] Krishna Sen has analyzed how women were represented as wives, passive or sexually threatening in films (1994: 8-9, 134, 144-47 respectively). Until I have done more research I do not feel able to comment on television soaps and historical epics. Representations seem split between women as victims and (not necessarily sexual) aggressors. I have suggested above that matters may be more complex.

[27] My research student, Sheila Fish, has developed these issues in her PhD thesis on representations of children in Indonesia. Even child-centred theories consist of adults speaking for children.

[28] 'The masses who remain stupid'. My argument makes use of Baudrillard's work on the masses (e.g. 1983, 1988), which, while not always consistent, is more thought-provoking than most of his critics.

As Agni Amorita nicely put it, there is 'a cynical expression debat kusir (debate of the coachmen) directed towards those who embarked on heated discussion. In a still feudalistic society, horsecart drivers are considered uneducated people who debate without any supporting arguments.' Indonesian political talkshows get hotter (*Jakarta Post* 1st October 2000).

[29] Crudely 'Doel the Educated'. Originally this was a film, SiDoel Anak Betawi, directed in 1973 by Sjumandjaja, starring Benjamin S and the young, Rano Karno, who went on to become a major star in successive television series.

[30] Krishna Sen delineates the ideal masses as portrayed in *Janur Kuning* (Yellow Coconut Leaf), a hagiography of Suharto's role in the revolutionary fighting around Yogyakarta.

The next set is important for what follows. These are internal procedures for controlling and delimiting discourse. Foucault identified commentary, the author and disciplines (1981: 56-61). Commentary is crucial. It is interpretation in action, because

> it allows the (endless) construction of new discourses: the dominance of the primary text, its permanence, its status as a discourse which can always be re-actualized, the multiple of hidden meaning with which it is credited, the essential reticence and richness which is attributed to it. But on the other hand the commentary's only role, whatever the techniques used, is to say at last what was silently articulated 'beyond' in the text (1981: 57-58).

Just as positing an 'author' limits discursive play and chance by anchoring the originary moment in an identifiable individual, so commentary limits chance by foreclosing interpretive openness in favour of repetition. How applicable though is this analysis to intermedia commentary in Indonesia?

By disciplines, Foucault had in mind academic disciplines, which he treated as the inverse of commentary, because they allow the creation of endless new statements. However what counts as a statement is tightly defined, just as in Indonesian mass media, what is appropriate as an editorial, documentary, investigative journalism, news, political discussion shows, action series, soaps, comedy or whatever. The apparent freedom of, say, political talk shows belies a rigid format.

For the media, there are other kinds of exclusion imposed even more arbitrarily under the rubric of economic imperatives. These are the common sense – in other words, fantasies – circulating in media corporations, such as what formats and programmes are safe, successful etc. What constitutes success however, and to whom, in post-Suharto Indonesian media? There, as elsewhere, there seems to be a whole battery of procedures aimed at eliminating uncertainty over the success of programmes and, ostensibly, at deciphering who is watching and what they make of it (the magic of audience ratings is a delightful, and expensive, example) and so on. It is ostensible, because it is not clear in how much television producers actually care who is watching. As one American TV producer put it succinctly: 'Audiences are just there to keep score between producers'.

A third category of procedures determines the conditions of application, of imposing rules and preconditions of suitability upon speaking subjects. (The expression Foucault used was the 'rarefaction of the speaking subject', which in French connotes not just abstraction, but depletion or exhaustion.) Here Indonesia irrupts into Foucault's relatively genteel world pervaded by secular rituals, communities of apprentices or experts, the imposition of doctrines and social appropriations of discourse like education (1981: 61-64). In popular perception at least, wealth – bribery, not to put too fine a point on it – or connections were the way in and virtually the sole conditions of suitability. Its rarefaction was in the system of *pegawai*. Maybe it has been done and I missed it, but I can think of few topics that so urgently needs a well theoretically grounded study as *pegawai*. Apparatchik, government officials, organic intellectuals, none of these terms does justice to this extraordinary tentacular apparatus of the New Order régime. (Why it is that the daily workings of bureaucracies defy description? Perhaps that is where their resilience lies.) You can cite former Eastern European and

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the *rakyat* (the ordinary people) [are] helpless victims of Dutch brutality, needing the Indonesian army's protection. The only positive contribution that the *rakyat* (men and women alike) make to the struggle is to provide food for the army (1994: 94, square parentheses mine).

other totalitarian systems as parallels. However I think it both catches the feel of, and is more interesting to start from, the distinctive practices of *pegawai* control over the mass media (on which Sen & Hill 2000 are informative).

Foucault's final category is interesting. It is, in effect, procedures for the denial of the reality of discourse, in other words its forms of closure. As regards the media, how come we do not immediately spot how breathtakingly contrived its productions are?[31] In Euro-American media, most obviously it is that realism, evident, say, in films with high production values, by which the gap between what is supposed to happen and its representation (here carefully omitting the 'as') is reduced or finessed. As elsewhere, though I suspect with distinctive modalities, various forms of collusion come into play. These would include stars, who at once inhabit the world of spectacle, utopia, dreams and yet, in interviews in fanzines and magazines, turn out to have deprived backgrounds, worked hard for success and fall in and out of love, spectacularly.

Then there is the audience. A popular saying of employees in the former Soviet Union ran: 'They pretend to pay us and we pretend to work'. Producers pretend to produce for imagined audiences and viewers pretend to imagine they watch. In Indonesia though the great mediating principle over the last two decades or so seems to have been culture. What makes the Indonesian media unique is that they talk about, and through the distinctive idioms of, Indonesian culture. The great articulatory practice of the media is to pretend there is such a thing, as distinct from a plethora of practices.

Foucault suggested that we need to pay attention to four principles, if we are to analyze the way discourse becomes hypostatized into culture, structure and other forms of determinacy, in so doing denying chance, discontinuity, dependence and transformation (1981: 68). The first, by reversing received wisdom, questions how agency is attributed. Be they Presidents or TV producers, are they quite as powerful, creative and in charge of events as is usually proclaimed? Much work on the left conjures up dark, quasi-omnipotent forces, so exnominated they can only be hinted at: late capitalism, institutional power relations, the military-industrial complex.[32] Second, the sense that 'there reigns a vast unlimited discourse, continuous and silent' (Foucault 1981: 67) requires dispelling. This is achieved by recognizing discontinuity. In other words, even the most monolithic of régimes, the most entrenched and sacred media institutions, when subjected to genealogical or ethnographic analysis, turn out to depend upon disjunct, often antagonistic and *ad hoc*, practices.

Third, we need to return to the specificity behind apparent regularity.

> We must conceive discourse as a violence which we do to things, or in any case as a practice which impose on them; and it is in this practice that the events of discourse find the principle of their regularity (Foucault 1981: 67).

Substituting 'media' for 'discourse' works well – hardly surprisingly as all discourse is mediated.

The idea of investigation commonly assumes a distinctive kind of work. It is one that proceeds from some superficially plausible, or beguiling, set of facts to revealing

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Foucault outlined three procedures (1981: 64-6). These are: animating discourse through the *founding subject* (the hero, the expert, here the media personality); the pre-existence of a world which provides *the originating experience* that we re-cog[31]nize in our analyses; and *universal mediation*, that process by which, in the media, events unfold – and can only unfold – according to previously determined discursive constraints.

[32] Exnomination, developed from Barthes (1972) is the process by which notionally important agents avoid being named, appear to be unimportant, but in fact naturalize themselves.

some 'interior, hidden nucleus' (1981: 67). This may be anything from the networks behind the ownership of Indonesian conglomerates (Aditjondro 2000), to the 'imagined community' behind the nation state (Anderson 1983) or the historical trope of 'Java' behind the New Order (Pemberton 1994).[33] The last principle challenges the predilections of scholars as much as media figures. It is the refusal of the inevitability of the hermeneutic move from the exterior to the revelation of a secret inner truth.

Objectivity, culture and meaning

A partly implicit theme of Foucault's argument is the centrality of meaning and interpretation to explanation. So let us consider three ways meaning, or reference, is assigned. In the first, reality determines or effectively constrains reference and meaning. In a broad sense therefore commentary is about clarifying the true referents and eliminating mistakes and distortions. In the second, mind is far more active. Reality is necessarily mediated by mind. So commentary is the business of establishing what mind has been up to and elucidating its twists, turns, blind alleys and so on, to reveal its crassness, cunning or genius. The final approach is composite. It adopts elements of both the other approaches and frames them by including the political and social forces that determine meaning differentially in the process of production and of reception. Commentary here is part of the forces of determination, but potentially also of opposition.

Before turning to the three forms of closure, it is helpful to sketch out some background. For various reasons I am unhappy with the presuppositions of the hermeneutic, or interpretive, approaches that are prevalent in the human sciences (Hobart 1982, 1985, 1986, 1999). On the whole we do not encounter interpretation declaring itself provocatively as such to the reader. It goes under substantializations like 'symbol', 'meaning' or 'culture'. It is no coincidence that media studies emerged from cultural studies. That 'culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language' (Williams 1983: 87) is not an auspicious start. The word is so ambiguous and polysemic that there is the distinct risk that what passes for analysis is simply slithering between different usages. Elsewhere (Hobart 2000a), I have argued that culture is an unnecessarily hegemonic, idealist and ethnocentric way of articulating highly diverse practices. Why not just get on and talk about the practices in question? Unfortunately, culture is convenient because, like Divinity, it is ineffable and inscrutable to all but the privileged Euro-American knowing subject, whom the idea licenses to interpret their supposed objects – the rest of the world.[34] The problem, as with most forms of idealism, is that it prevents you ever discovering anything your model has not already anticipated.

Rather than start with so powerful a pre-articulation as culture, I prefer to consider the media as a congeries of situated practices. This allows us to address some perennial problems in different ways. An example is representation. Instead of interposing a

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[33] The three authors who jumped to mind happen to be linked to Cornell University. This is not to exculpate scholars from other schools. It does suggest however that the persuasiveness of the Cornell style of analysis may not be unconnected with how it titillates well-entrenched sensibilities.

[34] Evidently there is a growing class of supposedly 'global' intellectuals. As entry requires studying at American or European centres of learning, or local imitations, and being able to express yourself in English, I wonder how diverse this globalization is. This I take to be the point of the emergence of, say, Asian cultural studies (e.g. *Inter-Asia cultural studies*), although at times such work seems to be more about circulating élites than a challenge to the hegemony of Euro-American thinking.

transcendental realm of culture, we need to ask who is representing what *as* what to whom, and how, on what occasion? It immediately becomes obvious then that producers, readers or audiences, what is represented *as* what, are part of a process of transformation, in which they are changed.[35] Mediation bluffs. It always involves change, while denying it. There is an apocryphal story of a burger who complained that Picasso's portrait of his wife looked nothing like her. Picasso asked: 'What does she look like then?' The husband is then reputed to have pulled out a passport photograph, to which Picasso said: 'She is rather small, flat and grey, isn't she?'

Representation is such a widespread practice that the kinds of change it brings about evidently vary. Let me just note those to do with 'form'.[36] Representation is often about 'formulating', that is taking previous representations and arranging them according to a formula to create a new order. It may be about making events and actions 'conform' to pre-existing interpretive frameworks, as in much Indonesian public life. Significantly however representing may be about 'performing'. This I take to be the significance of Speech Act theory (Austin 1975). Fairly obviously, what may matter is less what you say than what you *do* in representing something (illocutionary force) or what happens as a result of representing something as something (perlocutionary force). Even apparently straight representation however contains a twist. Arguably, even the locutionary force of uttering a proposition requires representing it *as* a statement, an order, a request or whatever (Searle 1971).

Conversely much energy is expended in denying this transformability by hypostatizing mediation into a series of substances: senders, messages, receivers, referents, codes and media themselves (e.g. Jakobson 1960).[37] Rather than uncritically assuming that television purveys a pre-defined reality to pre-existing receivers, reconsidered as a set of transformative practices, television (re-)produces its producers, viewers, its objects and its conventions of representation. For example, studying how 'the New Order defined the media as vehicles[38] for the creation of a "national culture"' (Sen & Hill 2000: 11) raises as many questions as it answers. What is involved in imagining Indonesia and Indonesians as articulable by culture in the first place? And what was the prior object that the media conveyed? If representation by definition cannot save its object, but has to change it into something else, do other approaches far better?

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[35] To develop Nelson Goodman, you always represent something *as* something else *to* someone on some occasion for some purpose or other.

> In representing an object, we do not copy…a construal or interpretation – we achieve it. In other words, nothing is ever represented either shorn of or in the fullness of its properties. A picture never merely represents x, but rather represents x *as* a man or represents x *to be* a mountain, or represents *the fact that x is a melon* (1968: 9).

[36] By this stage I hope it is clear that I am unhappy with the form : content dichotomy. However I am stuck with English usage. That change is implicitly a matter of form (essence being unchanging) is itself significant.

[37] A prime example of domesticating transformation is the work of Stuart Hall. Television consists of polysemic signs that are capable of transforming. 'Any such already constituted sign is potentially transformable into more than one connotative configuration' (1980: 134). Transformation is simply a measure of optionality between pre-articulated and highly structured connotative 'configurations'. With echoes of the old Cartesian dualism, he splits off denotation, while claiming this step is just 'analytical' (1980: 133). What else would it be?

[38] 'Conduit' metaphors of knowledge are as problematic (see Reddy 1979) as they are prevalent (e.g. Hall 1980: 128). The argument is circular. The media are vehicles, so they must contain something, which is meaning. And what is meaning? It is what the media, TV programmes etc. contain.

I hope this preamble helps to explain my interest in commentary. There is, however, an argument – indeed it is the default stance – which would make my worries mere post-structural trivia. If you can demonstrate that it is possible to analyze newspaper editorials, films or television programmes or whatever, to show what they mean, what they are really about, then you can ground the analysis and provide rigorous criteria for judgement.[39] The rest is at best explicatory, at worst just niggling. It is the default position because much work in cultural and media studies – quite apart from the more 'traditional' disciplines of philology and anthropology – assumes texts, programmes and so on have a decidable meaning. Scholarship is about determining which is true or false, correct or wrong. It is a powerful and persuasive vision.

It is also pervasive. At the time of writing, I have been discussing their projects with our current MA Anthropology of Media students. Most assume they can read magazines, watch a television programme or analyze web pages and, after going through the conventional academic motions, tell us what the 'texts' actually say. It is the ostrich theory of thought.

What actually is at issue? Is it about whether television programmes or newspaper articles accurately reflect an objective reality? Is it about whether they have a meaning? And, if so, can we say what it is? Is it what the producer meant? Or what the reader or viewer thought it meant? Or is what the experts think it is? What are you presupposing when you take there to be an objective account or real meaning?

The obvious difficulty in determining objective reality in the humanities or human sciences is that language and culture (i.e. the workings of mind) mediate this reality.[40] It is not a question, as naïve realists claim, of embracing a loony relativism, which denies there to be a reality at all. The problem is that facts are not strong enough to determine one, and only one, theory or interpretation, which adequately accounts for the facts. Theory, as Quine famously put it, is underdetermined by reality (1953). We always talk about the world using some pre-articulated frame of reference or other (Goodman 1972, 1978). So there are always different possible ways of accounting for any set of facts. At least since Charles Saunders Peirce, we have had to contend with the fact that how people use theories and frames of reference varies socially and historically. The object of knowledge in the human sciences is not reality as such (were it knowable), but how people have wrestled with, and claimed to know, that reality.[41]

More broadly still than particular theoretical complexes, if the world is always mediated by mind, how does it work? Two of the conventional answers in the human

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[39] My research student and colleague in the Balinese Television Project, Richard Fox, has written a useful critique of the ambiguous senses of 'judgement' in scholarship of Old Javanese. As he makes clear, critical uses of the word overlap uneasily with juridical. Euro-Americans still set themselves up in judgement over others.

[40] Johannes Fabian has addressed the issue of claims to objectivity in anthropology well. As he noted, the search for objectivity has been 'perverted by two misplaced strategies to make it safe once and for all: there were those who *naturalized* objectivity and those who *socialized* it' (1991a: 382). The problem of the latter is that it presupposes a degree of coherence in the humanities and human sciences that they do not have. I deal with some problems of the former below. See Fabian for a more extended analysis.

[41] This argument runs counter to that common claim of epistemological hierarchy by which the knower and her knowledge are superior to and transcend the object of knowledge. By contrast I take it that the knower and knowledge are part of the same problem.

sciences are collectively through culture or, potentially more individualistically, through meaning.[42]

If the world and human thinking is culturally mediated, a critical study of culture should then provide the means, if not to objective knowledge, at least to a reasonably deep or sensitive understanding. Such a possibility depends on how you define culture. The problem is that culture is impossible to define without either circularity or apriorism. On the most common account of culture as semiotic, culture comprises a system of symbols, which convey meanings that people share (e.g. Geertz 1973; Sahlins 1999). How can we understand these symbols and meanings? We do so by appreciating them as part of culture as a system.[43] If we do not assume them to be systematic, we are left with accidents from which we can infer nothing general. If we assume they are, we have presupposed mind and its workings to be prior to experience. So culture is 'the western mind' blown up to a cosmic scale (Benedict 1932: 24), endlessly rediscovering itself and admiring the view.

Perhaps meaning, as a more specific notion, is a safer starting point? Meaning however proves just as problematic. First, it is often simply culture under another description. (The problem is reflected in the title of this symposium. Culture both is – and is mediated by – meaning.) Meaning must be more than just whatever interpretations people happen to have made. How else would we exclude the opinions of bigots, the mad, children, the senile and drunk, or just plain mistakes? And what makes scholars' opinions superior (as if they ever agreed)? Is it, like packaged supermarket food, that we add value to raw thought? Or is what we add judgement? Like culture, meaning is a supplement, it must be *more than* its various, partly haphazard instances. In other words, philosophically both culture and meaning are substances (Collingwood 1946: 42-45). They are what is unchanging behind events. Unfortunately that also makes them ahistorical. We can now understand Foucault's critique more fully. Meaning is the substance created by the practice of interpretation.

The study of the mass media almost by definition involves interpretation in a broad sense.[44] Problems arise immediately however. How do you arrive at one interpretation rather than another? And what are the implications of so doing? Unfortunately the language of cultural and media studies naturalizes and substantializes both interpreting

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[42] For reasons of space, I omit the whole question of semiotics and language, because in media we are dealing with complex uses of a different logical order, such as the work and inter-textuality. A Peircean semiotics anyway treats signification as a situated process, in which the 'interpretant' (what interprets the sign, the outcome) becomes the object for potentially endless subsequent acts. Also I would follow Volosinov (1973) in arguing that, for present purposes, the idea of language as a system, and so the grounding of certainty, is untenable (Hobart 2001).

[43] James Clifford makes this point (1988: 30-21). Two elegant critiques of how circular and aprioristic thinking are constitutive of culture as a concept are McGrane 1989 and Fabian 1991b.

[44] This might seem a strong claim granted the sociological and political economic approaches to media. All presuppose some account of meaning though, even if as something unproblematic. Even Hoskins, McFadyen and Finn, who attempt an economic analysis of contemporary film and television, presuppose that such a 'cultural industry' is quite distinct from other kinds of industry and this difference is crucial, for instance, to government intervention in media matters, which are rarely left to markets. Worried that 'economists who interest themselves in the economics of culture…merely make themselves ridiculous if they subsequently affect to execute a sort of professional troll's dance on the economist's leg only' (1997: 3; citing McQueen 1983: 129), they unquestioningly assume an interpretivist ontology. Culture expresses a way of life through language and symbols, with which viewers identify. So programmes 'suffer a cultural discount when traded across international borders' because understanding is reduced (Hoskins *et al.* 1997: 4).

and its object through the image of reading a text. This literary metaphor is puzzling, as most people directly concerned with production spend much of their lives visualizing and de-textualizing. Anyway, as with representing, you textualize or contextualize something *as* something else (Hobart 1999: 113-114). 'This essential incompleteness of interpretation' is not because our standards of validation are caught in a progressive hermeneutic circle (Ricoeur 1976: 79), but because the practice of interpretation creates endless new objects and meanings. As Foucault put it:

> If interpretation can never be brought to an end, it is simply because there is nothing to interpret. There is nothing absolutely primary to interpret, because at bottom everything is already interpretation…so that there is established a relation of violence as much as of elucidation (1990: 64).

Two important points arise. First, there is an endless deferral, in which there is nothing other than previous interpretations. So Foucault concludes: 'one does not interpret what there is in the signified, but one interprets, fundamentally, *who* has posed the interpretation' (1990: 66). Mind, once again, is discovered reflecting on itself. Second, this violence of interpretations becomes articulated through the mass media into hegemony. As the implosion of the New Order régime makes clear, such hegemony is momentary and unstable, because it is always part of 'a confrontation of antagonistic articulatory practices' (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 135).[45] So how do the mass media produce such closure in Indonesia?

In short, the problems of meaning are legion, as the centuries-long debate in hermeneutics has made clear. Hermeneuts have been at loggerheads over whether there is such a thing as meaning, let alone whether there is one or, of necessity, many, or indeed what you can say about it without meaning being the product of your commentary. Who is empowered to enunciate the true, obligatory or preferred meaning? Where hermeneuts fear to tread, should we rush in and claim to know the meaning of a programme or text?[46] Yet we almost invariably do. The problem is not so much 'does a determinate meaning exist and what does it look like?', but what is at issue in our being so determined to imagine that it does?

Preferred meanings

The approaches discussed presume that you can determine reference and meaning without recourse to the circumstances of their use. Does adding an analysis of the social, political and ideological determination of meaning solve the problem? An often-cited piece tries to do just this. It is Stuart Hall's *Encoding/Decoding*.[47]

Hall's concern is to get away both from mechanical transmission or 'effects' models of communication and from 'content' analyses of texts. He problematizes these by noting that the meaning of television broadcasts are mediated by institutional

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[45] There is no time to elaborate here on articulation, which in many ways is the central notion of cultural and media studies, e.g. Hall 1996; Slack 1996. For a sophisticated account, see Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 93-148;

[46] The literature, even for pre-Heideggerian hermeneutics, is massive. As I have written on the topic at inordinate length (e.g. Hobart 1982; 2000b; see also Hirsch 1967; Ricoeur 1971), I shall not repeat myself. I have attempted to short-circuit the argument here by moving on to the post-Heideggerian work of Foucault and Derrida.

[47] In fairness to Hall, the article was extrapolated from an earlier stencilled paper written in 1973 and published in 1980. However, as the article is still widely cited as definitive, and as Hall has not reneged on most of what he wrote, it remains important.

structures. These comprise the technical conventions of production, the relations of production of which broadcasters are part and the frameworks of knowledge current in the media industry. All serve to encode meaning structures in particular ways in any broadcast. An equivalent series of structures affects how viewers decode broadcasts to extract their meaning structures. As the two sets of structures are not identical, misunderstanding and 'systematically distorted communication' is built in (1980: 135-36). The scope for variation, or polysemy, however is heavily constrained by the '*dominant cultural order*, though this is neither univocal nor uncontested' (1980: 134). How viewers decode meanings is not entirely determined, because there are alternative possible 'maps', each map being, however, effectively pre-articulated. This pre-articulation is double. First there are 'dominant' meanings encoded by the industry. Second 'there exists a pattern of "preferred readings"; and these both have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized (1980: 134).

In 1980 the argument might have seemed revolutionary. By 2000 it is quaint. Media practices are so solidified into (pseudo-Althusserian) structures, be these language, technical infrastructure, relations of production, frameworks of knowledge, meaning structures, codes, rules of encoding etc., that the outcome is intellectual Cubism. This is the more remarkable in that Hall's intellectual mentor, Ernesto Laclau, was arguing vehemently against such totalizing.

> Against this essentialist vision we tend nowadays to accept the *infinitude of the social*, that is, the fact that any structural system is limited, that it is always surrounded by an 'excess of meaning' which it is unable to master and that, consequently, 'society' as a unitary and intelligible object which grounds its own partial processes is an impossibility ([1983] 1990: 90)

Discourse is far from simply being the product of apparatuses of production cast into symbolic form through the codes and rules of language (Hall 1980: 128). For, if

> we renounce the *fixation* of those identities in a system, then the social must be identified with the infinite play of differences, that is, with what in the strictest sense of the term we can call *discourse* (Laclau 1990: 90).

While Laclau was wondering how to think theoretically beyond the impasses of structuralism, Hall retreated into fetishizing structure.

The theoretical assumptions of *Encoding/Decoding* are surprisingly conservative for a self-proclaimed radical. Onto a late Marxist model of structure, Hall has strapped on an early twentieth-century Saussurean account of language and signification, combined with a mid-nineteenth century theory of reference.[48] What is more, he has sutured a common sense conduit theory of meaning (language and signs are vehicles) onto an inspecific hermeneutic account of meaning. He then reifies the whole caboodle through a sustained spatial metaphor of mapping meanings (1980: 134). To cover his traces, Hall claims to eschew an essentialist account of meaning by arguing that it changes by virtue of structures of encoding and decoding. (This is like Edmund Leach's argument in *Political systems of Highland Burma* (1954) that he had transcended the rigidities of structure by proposing an oscillation between two models

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[48] The latter is the distinction between connotation and denotation, introduced by J.S. Mill in 1843 (see Lyons 1977: 175). Hall omits reference entirely, which would have enabled him to talk about practice in actual situations. Instead he hypostatizes practice into a whole series of structures, frameworks, rules etc.

of structure, which merely doubles the structure not eliminates it.) Essence keeps on squeezing out of the joints however, as Hall keeps trying to account for 'distortion' (1980: 131, 135-36). Unless he presupposes some essential entity, quite what is it that is being distorted?

Hall's article is famous among other things for the phrase 'preferred readings', which has become the standard means of closing down the ways in which programmes are appreciated. The closure works in two ways. First, it assumes not only that there is a number of identifiable readings, but also that the options are closed (that is, the difference between preference and choice). Second, it assumes that how people engage with television is doubly reducible not only to texts but also to the conventional academic way of engaging with texts, namely reading. No wonder the phrase is popular among cultural studies specialists with literary leanings. Aficionados of *Encoding/Decoding* usually gloss over the sentence that immediately follows the introduction of preferred readings. These, it emerges, are pre-articulated through institutionalized practices of production that create 'domains of "preferred meanings" [which] have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings' (1980: 134). Not only are the meanings unproblematic, but so is how Hall establishes the preferences.

What is the agent that determines not only the messages, meanings and codes, but how they are produced and even the limited options governing their reception? It is unclear, because Hall exonominates it. Is it (late) capitalism, capitalist media industries, élites within media industries, a class élite (Hall refers in passing to 'political and military élites' 1980: 101)? Even 'superstructure', especially language, codes and rules (Hall is strong on rules), seems at moments to be implicated. We have not so much a complex agent as a confused one. To the extent that agency is discernible, it seems to lie in structure itself.

Finally let us look briefly at the notion behind Hall's title, *Encoding/Decoding*. Once again, he has to skate rapidly backwards from his acknowledged intellectual antecedents, here Volosinov/Bakhtin. (I leave aside the fact that Hall's account of language is precisely what Volosinov castigated as 'abstract objectivism', 1973: 52-63.) Hall's analysis requires codes to be fixed. The flexibility in the system (sic) comes from the fact that the code behind encoding differs somewhat from that behind decoding and its possible variants. By contrast, Bakhtin had introduced the idea of context, which complicates the monologic, authoritarian implications of code:

> Context and code. A context is potentially unfinalized; a code must be finalized. A code is only a technical means of transmitting information; it does not have cognitive, creative significance. A code is a deliberately killed context (1986: 147).[49]

Hall's model assumes television only transmits information and manages to eliminate context at every stage of production through reception. Does television kill context so effectively? How could a moment of production determine all its future, and partly contingent, contexts of use? Given the diversity of situations of production, distribution, reception and commentary, how could Hall assume so *a priori*?

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[49] Volosinov makes a similar point, when he points out, why classical philology had to presuppose language to be systematic.

> At the basis of the modes of linguistic thought that lead to the postulation of language as a system of normatively identical forms lies a *practical and theoretical focus of attention on the study of defunct, alien languages preserved in written monuments* (1973: 71).

Whichever way we turn, attempts to define the meaning of television and the other media seem to tell us more about the closure of the analysts than the closure of the media. Breugel paintings depict ships of fools. In media studies it is loose canons that have taken over the ship.

3434Bibliography

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