

Narrative conventions: What contribute to competitive prime time television

News Discussions?

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Abstract

Television News has been a resorted platform for Indian viewers over the past decades. A majority of Indian viewers are known to trust this platform for its highly expected one-stop, credible, professionally opinionated sense of reporting. News channels have become platforms for celebrity journalists and anchors to exercise their authority. News organisations have become backbones of information and public opinion and journalists and their organisational agenda have taken this forward. With bold and competitive strategies used to enable news presentations, it is essential to examine and recognize existing Television news narrative conventions and practices that have gained momentum in recent years. Through a qualitative analytical approach taken for this research study, it is clear that narrative conventions exist and modify, thus producing fashionable and modernized forms of presentation techniques during prime time. With a clear organisational norm and genre of discourse shared by Indian English television channels today, the paper highlights persisting organisational norms, unconventional discourses, rhetoric (audio and visual) and music – a contributing element as existing contributors of narrative conventions.

Keywords: Television News; Narrative; Discourse; Rhetoric; Visual

Introduction

Prime time shows play a pivotal role as they are involved in constructing opinions of a regular agenda set by a media organisation. A regular Television news channel follows the narrative structure of reporting news in order of importance. TV News is not only ‘. . . a summation of the day’s events but is, like any other media text, a constructed product’ (Selby & Cowdery, 1995). All that goes into a regular news presentation is planned, sorted and decided with organisational constraints. This is based on the value added to the news report with importance given to it by the organisation. An everyday ‘. . . news production is constrained by organisational factors such as intense financial pressure and (lack of) time’ thus construing ‘bias and status-quo’ characterization in news (Patrona, 2009). As a result, ‘. . . the format and scheduling of TV news programmes tend to change fairly rapidly, to meet the changing nature of the news itself’ (Selby & Cowdery, 1995).

Narrative denotes the arrangement of events narrated in timely order. Newcomb (2004) explains that,

‘Narratives are constructs, relatively arbitrary arrangements designed to appeal to certain desires or to shape certain responses. They also remind us that in certain circumstances, the audience has knowledge of “what might happen” in the narrative and that the creators of the narrative can play upon expectation, defeating or confirming it, a point that becomes especially pertinent in the discussion of genre that follows’ (Newcomb, 2004).

Narratives create a sequential logical order and television news consists of narrative reports that can ‘. . . be analysed as narrative to discover how priorities and assumptions’ are ‘. . . shared by news broadcasters’ (Bignell, 2013). Thus conventions become existing orders or regulations that design the organisation of news for daily output of information. Thus

Television News uses ‘. . . the ideological function of naturalising the assumption that the day to day occurrences in the public arenas of politics business and international affairs are what is most important about the daily affairs of a society’ (Bignell, 2013).

Visual journalism, when compared to text based journalism ‘. . . has distinctively different characteristics, which influences how it is perceived’ (Thomson, 2018). Viewers are seen putting greater trust on the veracity of news in the presence of visuals. Though news channels seem to show their fashion of presenting ‘objective accounts of reality’, scholars have to side-step the myth and ‘demythologise’ news by analysing its conventions based on narration. The purpose of this study is to highlight narrative conventions manifest in a prime time news presentation, that contribute to the functionality of a regular prime time news show on two prominent Indian TV News Channels – Republic TV and Times Now.

Method and Theoretical Approach

The study is understood with a qualitative approach and is backed by a theoretical understanding of the theory of framing. Before understanding audience perceptions, the key is to understand the elements that device content for the audience¹. The method used to highlight these elements is textual analysis where the viewed content is delineated with connotations and subjective interpretations.

A news text is ‘. . . a system of organized signifying elements that both indicate the advocacy of certain ideas and provide devices to encourage certain kinds of audience processing of the texts’ (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). What goes into the presentation content of news on a daily

¹ In order to derive a thoughtful and comprehensive detailing of narrative conventions, the scholar reviewed a week’s telecast of Republic TV and Times Now between 21:00 hours and 23:00 hours. Results and discussion are based on an overview of analysing these episodes.

basis is made with an intention to shape public opinion. Events and issues are framed in particular ways to shape public opinion.

News framing refers ‘. . . to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text’ (Entman, 1993). According to Kitzinger (2007) framing refers to the process whereby we organize reality - categorizing events in particular ways, paying attention to some aspects rather than others, deciding what an experience or event means or how it came about. From a media studies research point of view, framing involves studying how journalists have ‘. . . told the story and why did they tell the story in this way?’ Kitzinger further explains the terminology to understand the way in which information is presented to us, elucidating that ‘frames’ also exist inside our heads as repertoires of organized patterns of thought - these frames, or what are sometimes called ‘schemata’, are triggered by the framing devices presented in the media.

Frames in news are touted as affecting audience perception, by activating certain constructs. As CH de Vreese (2004) states, ‘. . . news can encourage certain “trains of thought” which citizens make use of in subsequent judgements’. Previous studies including Vreese (2004) elucidated on news frames as headlines, introductions and lead stories presented on television news. However, with the progression of unconventional styling used in stimulating natural curiosity and excitement in watching prime time news, efforts have gone into endorsing these shows. Frames which constitute regular texts that persist on Television news can also apply to prior advertisements that endorse and brand news anchors and channel names.

Therefore, all films, photographs and artworks are the product of human action and are by this fact entangled to varying degrees in human social relations; they therefore require a wider frame of analysis in their understanding, a reading of external narrative that goes beyond the visual text itself (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015).

Results and Discussion

On viewing these two channels the scholar has highlighted the following narrative conventions that pose to contribute the overall effect of a prime time news discussion.

Organisational Norm

Bignell (2013) uses the term 'norm' to state how it is a 'cultural construct' and would '... shift according to the balance of power'. Prime time TV news creates an identity of holding this cultural norm in presenting news. TV News presentations involving talks and debates are now part of regular modes of presentations. This genre has seen an amalgamation of '... reconfigurations in terms of formats, thematic repertoires, and journalist roles, as a result of increased marketization, as well as broader institutional transformations' (Beciu, Lazar, & Madroane, 2018). It is known for its argumentative and interrogative performance in debates and discussions coming across a dominant stand point from the views of the anchor who seems to be an authoritative expert; taking the central position in following up with views and opinions coming across from panellists. This norm is denoted on Indian TV News channels as anchors stress on showing 'actual truth' to the viewers who in turn feel that this is the absolute information given to them.

A clear reason to hold an organisational oriented norm was a result of privatisation which is seen in most independent news channels other than Doordarshan. What have these private news channels in store since then? It is the era of dramatized tabloid content, deemed as exclusive breaking news that is meant to be sold to the audience rather than told. Anchors hold a personalised approach towards their audience. It refers to the persistence of a media system as exhibited by them, '... subjected to a set of laws and regulations held in common or logically inter-related' (McQuail, 2013). In India, a media culture of debates, talks and exhibition through demonstration was a result of privatisation, upholding political content

deemed as democratic and participatory. The tendency to introduce 24/7 TV news channels marked an era of forming new genres of presentation and discourse. This had been prominent even globally, in which these competing TV News channels ‘. . . would cultivate various forms of political bias and even partisanship . . .’, becoming ‘. . . polarized, split between . . .’ news channels that support by positioning different powers and oppositions. (Beciu, Lazar, & Madroane, 2018)

In these times, Indian English news channels show similar forms of discourse as they highlight news, centred on debates. These debates lay emphasis on political agendas or leanings, thus shoving audience with ideas of political stand points, politicians and exaggerated news content that viewers feel significant for the day. Similar characteristics that surround these news channels are a) the genre of content presentation, (b) argumentative and debate oriented topics of news presentation, and (c) rational deliberation and authoritative stances that contribute to celebrificationⁱ of news presenters/ anchors/ journalists. Beciu, et al (2018) use the term personalization wherein the journalist substitutes himself/ herself for public opinion and is a well capacitated figure that oversees and exposes dominant public discourses.

Unconventional discourse

While Bignell (2013) states that ‘news narrative measures balance and objectivity against currently dominant ideologies in society’, news in these channels create a realistic approach of adding what is a current dominant ideology, so that viewers are talking about an issue raised by a particular news channel rather than what seems to be balanced and valued as news in reality. Another terminology that supports this stance is discourse as Hayword (2018) states that it is ‘. . . the way in which texts are enunciated (brought into being)’. It also refers

to the ‘. . . social process of making sense of and reproducing reality and thereby of fixing meanings.

Discourse simultaneously becomes the ‘product’ and ‘constituter’ of reality, speaking as ‘. . . the hegemonic voice . . .’ reflecting and reinforcing ideology which in turn becomes power relations. Here, it is media discourse that shapes the regular social construction of reality. They are wide ranging ‘. . . social productions of meaning . . .’ such as political, institutional and cultural. Other factors that go into creating these conventions include - ‘. . . social institutions, power structures, professional practices and values. . .’ that impact the selection and shaping of accounts of reality. These are visible and invisible constituents of a media system as McQuail (2013) purports that different media sectors have separate forms of governance, business models and ownership. With reference to news organisations, many are active on their behalf in entering the flow of information.

Rhetorical techniques in news presentations

Colloquialisms - Colloquialisms constitute informal words or phrases. In the case of news presentations, colloquialisms are used to add to the essence of culture specific conversations that keep culture specific audience attuned to the naturality of the performance. Colloquialisms are used to build the intensity of the news presentations adding to the theatrical implications of closely associating audience to the news channel on viewing the overall episode. They prove to be helpful as occasional rhetorical flourish that add richness of performance to the presentation. While adding richness to the news presentations, words and phrases in the course of this form of discourse create identity of the brand and the news anchors are personalized as celebrities or best performers.

The news anchor moderating the show is well versed with a stylistic conversational diction that mobilizes content presented on the prime time show. With the use of colloquialisms in

news conversations, during panel discussions audience develop a culture specific expectation from daily episodes as culture specific words, phrases and expressions can build trustworthiness of the channel. This thus helps in glorifying and appreciating its format and decisions made in the form of conclusions after every debate.

The use of colloquialisms, blame games and heavy straightforward reactions have reinforced a paradigm shift thus enabling news channels to take overall authority in claiming their organisational norm. These are stressful actions made with deliberate attempts to show audience that these organisational agendas exist to create good value for news.

Favouritism - Favouritism is referred to as preferential treatment. With reference to news presentations, anchors mobilise their authority which is evidently seen and heard with his or her authoritative performance through the rise in volume of their voices in the course of the news discourse. The volume rises and serves as an authoritarian move to add force by preferentially treating one party and encouraging responses to serve newsy views on their side.

While words and phrases such as ‘India wants to know’ or ‘the people of India’ are being used, the anchors relationship with the viewers is being influenced as stronger and more positive, backed by a positively opinionated push from the audience towards the anchor’s intention. This form of ideation creates a suitable scope for viewers to advocate what the anchors support.

Authoritative stances - Prime time news debates are opinionated. The use of multiple participatory split screens encourages authority from all members present in the studio or at their respective locations. However, the anchor on the show, dressed in his or her formal business clothes holds an elite position to run the show. The debate is initiated by the anchor while confronting panellists on either side stand for or against a topical debate, thus creating a

binary oppositionⁱⁱ to the conversational matter that hypes up in the studio. These binary oppositions in the form of backing a matter or situation or slamming or criticising a matter, adds to the authority and dominion of the news channel. The anchor initiates authoritative stances that gel with confronting conversations. These authoritative stances are deemed to mar some panellists while some are glorified as they remain in tune to the news channels agenda for the day.

Interrogative opinions - Every panel discussion presented on the show is mingled with narratives and counter narratives. News is a narrative in itself which begins with a gist of the entire presentation. Once the initial narrative is complete, it moves towards progression with a list of panellists introduced on screen. The anchor holds a central position in moderating the discussion which also brings across interrogative opinions that divert the talks to the anchor's requirement. These interrogative opinions brand the Television channel showing audience that this becomes the only channel to disclose information which is well required for regular viewers.

Music on Prime Time News

Bignell (2013) defines the initial music as 'dramatic orchestral music' played in the beginning of the news show giving cues to the viewers that the most important news is to come only on this channel with this anchor and with the particular show. The title sequence boldly flows enabling viewers ' . . . to identify the pleasures offered by a programme. . . ' (Bignell, 2013) also giving the channel a clear brand identity. The purpose of music is to ' . . . direct the mood of the audience, to reinforce the pace of the screen action, or to provide a musical motif behind the moving image', (Newbold, 2006) it is ' . . . more than just a reflection of a character, action or mood'. It is a mode of communication that ' . . . has

meaning and mediates on the physical level between its mental and psychic levels.’ (Mazolla, 1997)

Music has gained an ephemeral significance in presenting news on a regular basis. It enhances the recognition of a particular channel, stimulating audience preparation and curiosity towards information in store for them, thus helping in the ‘. . . shaping of domestic consumption’ (Deaville, 2011). Studies on music fall under research in Television sound. Unlike films, music or sound on television is played ‘. . . to ensure a certain level of attention, to drag viewers back to looking at the set’ Ellis (1982). Films encourage ‘voyeuristic pleasures of the cinematic gaze’ while Television sound (or music played in the background) ‘. . . appeals to the sense of hearing. Scholars in the mid 90s have emphasized how Television sound ‘. . . serves as a value laden editing function identifying parts of the image that are sufficiently spectacular to merit closer attention on the part of the intermittent viewer.’ Thus sound attracts these intermittent audiences to follow and contribute attention even if they are not watching the flow of content on screen but have a participatory approach of developing indirect attention towards the content’s presentation.

Conclusion

On examining the constituents that create news as an end product on prime time, it is found that the organisational norm serves the purpose of dictating daily agenda for news content. Secondly, discourse has taken an unconventional structure as some news topics hold more volume than others. As the anchor raises his voice, overlapping the panellists’ judgemental tone, the discursive mode quickly shifts to one authoritative mode where the anchor is considered as a celebrity justifying his or her points of view. Rhetoric brings across more interesting tactics to get across to the audience, so that they know what important matters contribute to the societal functioning. But, in such cases rhetoric only forms part of shaping

information which is understood as reality that reflects the world outside the four corners of a room. As music has served a quintessential purpose of adding hype to news presentations, attracting audience to attentively follow the debated topic and its output, music stimulates the urge in viewers to get the grip of watching daily prime time news.

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ⁱ A term used by Musso (2009) & Turner (2009) as cited by Beciu et al, (2018) is made to understand how one is made a celebrity.

ⁱⁱ The term as used by Bignell (2013) highlights narratives as sets of relations between terms that are opposed or similar to each other.