

Reading young adult South Africans' reading of national television news

ABSTRACT

This article introduces a theoretical perspective on young adults' television news-viewing choices grounded in the synthesis of reception aesthetics, socialisation theory and qualitative research methodology. It argues that this theoretical framework allows for a deeper contextual reading of the reader-text relationship and for the argument that, despite post-apartheid social transformation, young adult South Africans' readings of locally produced television news texts are still ideologically situated sociocultural imports traceable to their differential class, race and gender positions in the country's social structure. Evidence produced through focus-group interviews is used to support the position of the introduced theoretical framework.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding young adults' television news-viewing choices needs a new theoretical direction. Harwood's (1997) integration of uses and gratifications (U&G) and social identity theory (SIT) in analysing young adults' television viewing choices is a useful – though limited – foundation from which to build such theoretical direction¹.

Harwood's theoretical and empirically grounded observation is that individuals undoubtedly have many motivations for seeking out particular media messages. He further quite correctly observes, that though motivations for viewing particular shows have been considered primarily at the individual level and the interpersonal level, they have rarely been considered at the collective level.

Overcoming this shortcoming, Harwood integrates U&G and SIT to posit that “individuals seek out particular messages which support their social identities (i.e., provide positive social comparisons with outgroups), and avoid messages which do not support their identities” (1997: 1). Harwood succeeds in demonstrating how social identity mediates television-viewing choices. He however deliberately limits himself to age as a demographic mediator of social identity. From this end a new conceptual direction is needed.

The premise of this new conceptual direction presumes that individuals' conscious and voluntary associations with imagined/virtual *ingroups* – via choosing specific media messages of particular aesthetic and ideological form – are arguably products of various forms of socialisation.

Active text readers' self-reflective disassociations with *outgroups* (could) mirror deeper politically inspired gender, racial and class identity struggles historically produced by a particular sociocultural environment. The theoretical framework through which this *tentative* conceptual position is articulated in this study is a synthesis of the qualitative research methodology, socialisation theory and reception aesthetics.

Integration of reception aesthetics (Iser, 1978; Jauss, 1974), as appropriated by media and cultural studies (cf. Fiske, 1987; Hall, 1980), and socialisation theory (Atkin & Gantz, 1978; Buckingham, 1997; Chaffee & Yang, 1990) points to the unexplored compatibility of reception aesthetics and socialisation theory². It also points to the efficacy of these conceptual perspectives in examining (post)modern young adults' television news-viewing choices in a complex social system like South African society.

¹ Though David Buckingham's (1997a) study, “News media, political socialisation and popular citizenship: towards a new agenda” provides an authoritative and extremely useful conceptual map of this area of research, it is less about how young people read television news.

² Socialisation theory marks the theoretical and scholarly 'beginnings' of investigations into local youth-news media relationship itself (see Buckingham, 1997).

South African society, post apartheid, is still a structured system of meaning-making signs that conditions young adults to enter the world of news texts with a particular set of 'horizon of expectations'. That is, (preconceived) expectations of the text or texts conditioned by or imported from their sociohistorical world through socialisation.

1. SOCIALISATION THEORY

Socialisation theory's application here does not subdue young adults' agency. In essence, this article fully acknowledges the notion of active and interpretive readers who, within the horizons of their frame of reference, polysemically decode institutionally encoded texts such as television news. Yet it posits that the text reader's frame of reference is a socioculturally constructed sphere of perception, accumulated through various forms of social intercourse. Young adults navigate television programmes not as empty vessels or culturally/politically isolated beings, but as embedded social subjects with preconceptions; therefore, as socialised beings.

Taken in its most neutral sense, (political) socialisation in this article is used to denote "a developmental process by which adolescents acquire cognitions, attitudes and behaviors relating to their political environment" (Atkin & Gantz, 1978: 184).

Political socialisation studies argue that much of the most political learning takes place prior to adolescence "and that the lessons learned at that stage tend to persist into adult life" (Buckingham, 1997: 349). Recent studies argue that the influence of parents, older siblings, peers and community factors *play a role in socialisation* (cf. Buckingham, 1997: 350; Chaffee & Yang, 1990).

Young adults in this study 'enter' the world of SABC and e.tv news texts either as inhabitants of economically depressed townships or up-market suburbs, South Africa's sociocultural spaces structured by the history of inequality, 'difference' and 'othering'. These social spaces are not only inherent with meaning-imposing signs but they also configure young adults' subjectivities of reading. The nearness of the apartheid past, for example, exposes the extent to which young adults still live in different worlds imposed on them both by history and current economic opportunities and restraints.

Their respective worlds empower them with sociocultural language and means of making sense or frames of reference. Their social worlds provide them with pre-established symbols and interpretive frames that make it possible for supposedly 'self-contained' and 'free-floating' textual signs to signify or to culturally and ideologically *mean* something, not only in general but also in terms of their immediate political spaces.

To discount, therefore, the influence of this context makes for what can be referred to as the 'second order' of reading, that is – in this context – young adults' *actual* reaction to television news. This is a preoccupation in the international youth-news media discourse where the focus is on whether or not young adults are losing interest in various news media (see Buckingham, 1997).

This makes little, if any, provision for the sociocultural capital, accumulated through social networks (family, friends, university, etc.) and other socialisation texts that young adults bring into the reading and perception process of texts.

Studies grounded in socialisation theory identify how social networks influence young people's relationship with media texts. These studies clearly indicate that children, teenagers and young adults emulate their parents' television-viewing patterns. Gunter and McLeer (1990: 36), for example, observe that parents provide models of television viewing, which are matched by their offspring. According to Guntlett and Hill (1999: 86), "[T]his certainly seems to be the case in relation to the development of news consumption practices for *young adults*" [author's emphasis] ().

In this context, it ought to be argued that in the same way that literal and audio-visual texts are normally analysed and interpreted against their ideological context of production, young adults' 'texts' should not be treated as autonomous but rather as expressions of their 'authors' socio-economic and cultural contexts, and as part of the whole system of reference, meaning and of signification.

It is from these texts that one reads how young adults receive television news against their socialisation; it is in interpreting these texts that one recognises that they are expressions of socio-economic contexts of power and of powerlessness. From them one recognises that the "... distribution of power in society is paralleled by the distribution of meanings in texts, and struggles for social power are paralleled by semiotic struggles for meanings" (Fiske, 2001: 248).

In this regard, this article's responsibility becomes that of methodologically determining the meaning of young adults' texts as manifestations of their readings of locally produced television news texts.

This article's theoretical take privileges neither the reader nor the text; it emphasises interaction and negotiation between the two *almost* to the same point that John Fiske has already suggested the abandonment altogether of the categories of 'text' and 'audience' as separate analytical entities. Instead, Fiske (in Seiter, Borchers, Kreutzner & Warth, 1992: 11) argues that "television watching should be conceived of as a process of meaning production in which 'text' is merely a substratum from which the viewer may construct various realizations".

Even within the reception paradigm itself, therefore, this article rejects those interpretations of the reader-text relationship – like that of Stanley Fish – that radically suppress the text and ultimately conclude that the reader is the producer of textual meaning.

The 'world' of television materially and symbolically exists. There is a 'phenomenological presence of the world' of television news texts that young adult readers negotiate or bargain with. When young adults interpret television news signs, there is an interaction between them and news texts. According to the phenomenologist Poulet (1969: 54), young adults are inside the news text and it is inside them: "there is no longer either inside or outside". Pitout (2001: 245) maintains that

very few messages are self-explanatory and transparent: “... we must engage with or act upon a text to produce meaning. In other words, we must internalise and appropriate a message in order to make it our own”). In this view, both young adult readings (as text) and television news (as text) require reading in context. Application of reception aesthetics is an integral part in this determination of meaning.

2. RECEPTION AESTHETICS

The ‘aesthetics’ aspect of reception theory is applied here as outlined in 1970 by the German literary historian Hans Robert Jauss (Baldick, 2001: 213) and also as used in media studies, i.e. as having its roots both in reception aesthetics (German, *Rezeptionaesthetik*) and in the encoding/decoding model of reception developed by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Pitout, 2001: 243).

Further, two leading concepts associated with Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, of which reception theorists have made considerable use, are also used in this work in analysing the activity of reading (cf. Hawthorn, 1992: 149). The first, which is formulated by Jauss (1982) is called *horizon of expectation*. Jauss draws on philosophical hermeneutics to argue that “literary works are received against an existing ‘horizon of expectations’ consisting of readers’ current knowledge and presuppositions about literature, and the meanings of works change as such horizons shift” (Baldick, 2001: 213).

Jauss’s ‘horizon of expectation’ has implications for both writers and readers – it influences writers and readers in the composition and reading of literary works. Writers, in the composition of their works, have to reflect subscription to particular conventions of a mode, tradition and genre into which their specific literary works fall. In their reading of particular genre texts, readers internalise and come always to expect these inherent properties to be embedded in texts and respond to them.

Two points are particularly worth mentioning here with respect to the application of the concept of the ‘horizon of expectation’ and certain aspects of the current study. First, audiences’ recognition of the conventions of television news genre generates pleasure. Second, familiarity with these conventions, specifically those of South African broadcast television was one of the major important criteria considered in the selection of the focus group participants – hence purposive sampling.

The second main concept of reception theory, introduced by Iser (1974, 1978), is that of the implied reader. Through the notion of this type of a reader, Iser is interested in describing the ‘act’ of reading. He sees the act of reading as “... a process by which the reader traverses the text, both in an initial and successive readings closing ‘gaps’ and filling ‘blanks’ so as to make work consistent” (Brooker, 1999: 189). Iser’s conception of an active reader is one who interprets literary work by filling blanks in the text with his/her knowledge, experiences, and frame of reference – these being an inescapable part of the reader’s social and cultural life world (Pitout, 2001).

For Iser – when readers interpret texts – there is an interaction between the readers and the texts. Particularly important in Iser's theorisation of this relationship is his assumption of a greater degree of interaction between text and reader. Neither party is all powerful over the other. The text pushes the reader in a certain direction and the reader fills in any gaps left in the text (Sim & van Loon, 2004: 84).

This emphasis sets Iser apart from other reception theorists, reader-response theorists (particularly Stanley Fish), and poststructuralist thought. According to Brooker (1999: 189), "Iser grants the text an existence prior to the reading process which 'concretizes' its meaning and brings text and reader to a point of convergence". Although – in Iser's thinking – the reader anticipates the text and the act of reading "is therefore seen as projective and creative, [this] is not to the degree [...] that the reader produces its meaning" (Brooker, 1999: 189).

On the other hand, Stanley Fish's perspective on the relationship between text and reader is radical and is part of what distinguishes reader-response theory from reception theory. Fish insists that the reader is actually the producer of the meaning of the literary text. In rejecting the notion that the reader is the sole producer of meaning, Stuart Hall's (1980) model of preferred reading and John Fiske's (1987) concept of polysemy are also applied.

The application of Hall's model of preferred reading is to demonstrate three ways in which young adults can read or decode locally produced television news texts as encoded institutionally by either SABC or e.tv. Firstly, young adults may accept the dominant ideology of a particular television news text or the assumptions of a particular news channel. This is called a *dominant* reading or interpretation.

Second, audiences may adopt a *negotiated* reading of the text or of an institution that produces it, that is, they can "agree to an extent with the dominant ideology of the text but reserve the right to modify their views. In other words, they can negotiate a position somewhere between accepting and rejecting the ideological messages of the text" (Pitout, 2001: 254).

The third form of reading, *oppositional* reading, is an extreme end of the first. Readers here can interpret a media text in the way that is entirely opposed to the dominant ideology of the encoder. In other words, young adults may fully reject meanings and interpretations of events by a particular news text.

The ideological meanings of television news texts, to borrow from Fourie's (2001: 322) discussion of discursive practices, "are only potential meanings as they can only become meaningful to particular readers who interpret them and mediate such meanings through their own knowledge, experiences and views". This observation is similar to the one raised above regarding the role of socialisation in reading text meanings, that is, young adults interpret television news texts from their various social positions and dispositions (knowledge, prejudices, and so forth) (Fourie, 2001: 322).

That various social groups can interpret texts differently depending on their social positions, leads to the identification of another important term in interpreting young adults' reading of television news texts, namely polysemy. For Fiske (1987), the proponent of polysemy, media texts provide possibilities for multiple *readings*, some even contradictory. Importantly for this study's emphasis on social context, these readings "correspond to the reader's response to his or social conditions not to the structure of the text" (O'Sullivan *et al.* 1994: 239). The foregoing theoretical presuppositions influenced both the methodology and method employed in the study.

3. METHODOLOGY

The choice of research method was influenced particularly by socialisation theory and reception aesthetics' concept of the horizon of expectations. As such, screener questionnaires were used for ensuring appropriate profile and eligibility of each prospective participant and only those who had exhibited sufficient prior knowledge of television news texts were included in focus groups. Towards the end of 2003³, prospective participants were purposively sampled to elicit their knowledge of television news and the types of news channels they watched. Population parameters such as age, gender, race, and frequency of television news viewing were crucial determinants for inclusion in focus groups.

By June 2005, seven sets of in-depth focus-group interviews with seven to eight young adults in each had been conducted for this study. By the end of data collection, forty-nine young adults had been interviewed and the same number of questionnaires collected from them. Of all the Pretoria-based focus groups conducted with young adults from working-class backgrounds, there were fourteen black males and thirteen black females. Of all the Cape-Town-based focus groups conducted with young adults from middle-class backgrounds nine were white males and eleven white females.

Artificial television news environments were avoided at all costs. No television news tapes were brought in by the researcher for the participants to watch. Focus-group interviews aimed at establishing the youths' readings as they consciously happened at home, student residences, etc., and not in a 'created' environment.

If the central aim of reception ethnography is to understand the lived experiences of media consumers ... then it has to engage with situational contexts in which media are used and interpreted (Moore, 1993: 32).

³ This is part of a broader research project whose various set of results continue to be published: Ndlovu, M. (2008). South African journalism and mass communication research on youth and news media: a reflection. *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies*, 29 (1), 64-78 and Ndlovu, M. 2010. (forthcoming). *Marketing politics to generation X*. In K. Gouliamos & A. Theocharous (Eds). *Political marketing: cultural issues and current trends*. New York: Haworth Press.

To allow for adequate discussions of the main and related topics, focus-group sessions lasted between ninety to ninety-five minutes. The researcher as the moderator introduced the purpose of the study and explained to the participants that they were free to speak without being prompted, but would need to identify themselves by assigned number as only the audiotape, as the recording device, was used both to capture interview processes and for purposes of transcription and interpretation.

With participants' consent, responses were recoded and subsequently transcribed, this being the norm after conducting such interviews and for facilitation of accurate analysis.

Participants' responses were developed into themes and categories describing meanings communicated about a particular aspect of the asked research question(s). The data were captured on Microsoft excel. The software allowed for the captured data to be developed into illustrative tables and charts like those used in this article. The whole process of data collection was conducted in English and it produced the following results and discussion.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Parental influence, to which focus-group discussions paid attention, is a socialising agent. This aspect was probed against evidence that young adults emulate their parents' television viewing patterns (Gunter & McLeer, 1990; Guntlett & Hill, 1999). What emerged in discussions was that participants who lived with their parents tended to watch news far more regularly than those who lived on their own in student residences, digs or flats.

A Cape Town-based white/middle-class respondent pointed this out, summarising the view of the many in this category: *"My parents and my grandparents are ... when the news comes up are like ... they are absolutely dedicated ... so I also watch constantly."*

A Pretoria-based working-class/black participant also alluded to this: *"I watch four times a week. That is because my dad is watching it. When I go home I watch the news every night. My parents always have. Now my dad never misses it. I think that it has big role to play."*

News programmes that young adults reported to have watched regularly were broadcasts that were aired in the evening either on SABC 1, 2, 3 and e.tv. This leads to the following very important question about these television news channels.

4.1 Research question 1: Which station are you most likely to watch for television news, SABC 1, 2, 3 or e.tv?

Depending on their language competence, young adults had four television news channels at their disposal. What then motivates one to watch a particular channel over the others and why? This article, through its guiding theoretical framework and subsequent evidence gathered from focus-group discussions, argues that both one's motivation to watch and reception of a news channel are individual choices as they are influenced by one's historically-constructed social position.

The South African social structure is a structured system of meaning-making signs, one which (dis)empowers young adults to enter the world of news texts with a particular set of horizon of expectations of the text imported from their sociohistorical world. This is evident in young working-class black females' motivations and high preference for SABC 3 news.

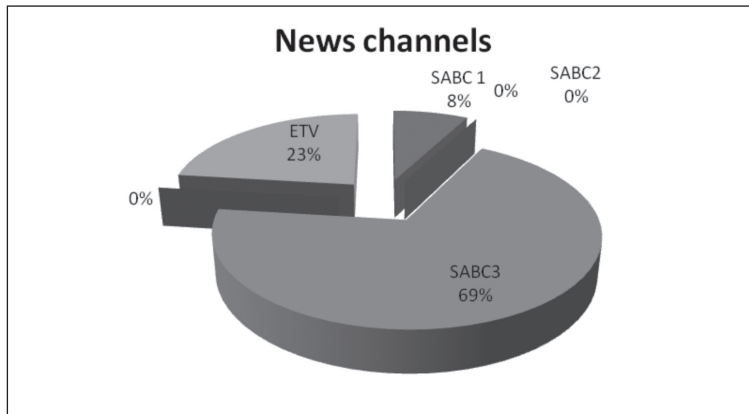


Figure 1.1 News channels most likely to be watched by young black female participants

Young adult black females indicated a marked high preference for SABC 3, and to a lesser degree for e.tv. Both are English-medium channels. At least three factors, based on knowledge gained from focus-group discussions, are discernible in this regard: self-perception and social capital deficit, and perceived redemptive and educational value of SABC 3 News, particularly the newsreader's role and English language.

Young black females watched SABC 3 News for satisfaction of personal integrative needs (needs related to the individual's desire for self-esteem and self-actualisation).

Contextually, working-class females saw themselves as doubly disadvantaged by both economically depressed township life and South African patriarchal society. They entered the world of SABC 3 News against their real socio-economic experiences and 'perceived' social capital deficit. On SABC 3 News they watched young successful news readers in charge and articulate mostly in the English language, which they ranked highly as one of the means towards social mobility. Strong personality news/current affairs anchors like e.tv's Debra Patta appealed to them.

For them, watching SABC 3 News was part of consciously accumulating social capital, like reading magazines and other media, to lift them out of poverty. (The ideology of the importance of education reigned supreme in this group.) Their acceptance of SABC 3 News as redemptive was equally a rejection of part of their social experience, which they saw as temporal, unnecessary and needing to be escaped from.

The issue of English language and the role it plays in the selection and perception of news channels deserves much more attention than it has thus far received in the local youth-news discourse. In examining it in this study, broader debates that dominate South Africa's post-apartheid discourse have emerged.

While, for example, proponents of Africanism, anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism want to see more young (particularly) black people consuming news in their indigenous languages, other than in inherited 'colonial' English, young black females showed a preference for SABC 3 News, this in part, because of the English language, its formal use as compared with e.tv's informal use of the language (see below).

The way that these female working-class youths approached SABC 3 News texts on the basis of the English language was practical and individualistic, not as political and idealistic as that of their male counterparts (see below). For the former it was essential to be fluent in the English language so as to accumulate social capital for interpersonal and group conversations, and to ready themselves for the work market. As one Pretoria-based working-class female pointed out:

"It's like you sit with other girls, nê, from the same township, nê. But they speak better English because they went to good schools; their parents are rich. Look at the people on SABC shows; they speak good English with good accent ... You won't get a job if you are not good, that's a fact, no one will hire you." Agreed another working-class participant: *"I agree, every opportunity you get, use it to learn new words and stuff."*

For these participants, English news is then regarded as the conduit through which new terms and concepts can be acquired to enrich their English language vocabulary. Acquiring these terms and concepts is seen as a means of intellectual growth and sophistication. Participants for whom English is a second language perceived news presented in English not as simply providing information, but also as playing a particular educational role. One participant rhetorically asked: *"How else are we to learn? There are new terms that are to be learned, [and] then you consult your dictionary."* It is in clear understanding of the 'deficits' that characterise their immediate environment, in comparison with other environments, that these young adults look up to the power of the text.

Their least preference for SABC News presented in African indigenous languages was because, in part, African languages were perceived as limiting at least in two ways: they were seen as complex to understand/comprehend, and they were not necessarily perceived as strong vehicles towards social mobility and for networking and communicating in the globalising world.

This was also not the first time that it was found that some black young adults were unable to understand/comprehend television programmes news presented in their own home languages. In their study, Du Plooy-Cillier and Bezuidenhout (2003: 11) note that black young

adults felt that news programmes presented in African languages used language that was too sophisticated and abstract to comprehend, and they thus felt alienated.

Participants in this study felt that African languages were too ‘deep’ to understand, hence constituting a barrier to watching news in African languages. Most young females, especially female participants who were speakers of IsiXhosa, IsiZulu, Sesotho said they could not understand news in their own languages. *“They are so hard to ... (news readers), I can’t understand them. I ask people to translate for me half the time, so I might as well watch news the English news,”* said one speaker of an African language.

Another important factor identified in the focus-group discussions was that the issue that the English language speaks to the social class problem even among black people. Participants in focus-group discussions were products of public schools, and the feeling among them was that their counterparts who had attended private and Model C schools stood a better chance of social mobility because of their mastery of the English language.

The foregoing further emphasises the recurring point in this study that reading of television news has to be anchored in the socio-political context within which reader and text encounter each other.

For township-based young black females, reception of SABC 3 News – and to a lesser extent e-news – goes beyond gratification of cognitive needs (needs that relate to acquiring information, knowledge and the understanding of our environment and also of satisfying our curiosity). It can also be inferred that young black females’ preference for SABC 3 News is influenced by various factors, such as gender, race, class and political orientation. These factors need more exploration in future. Young adult black males, though, watched SABC differently.

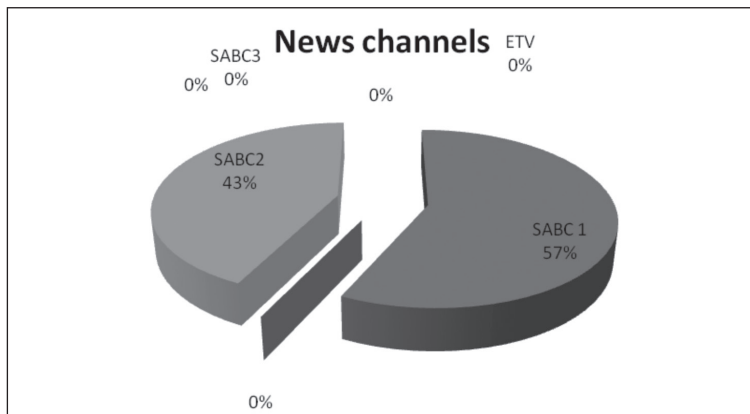


Figure 1.2 News channels likely to be watched by young black males

Young adult black males' choice of news channels, in addition to gratification of cognitive needs, was largely political, idealistic and grounded in resistance to the 'imperial' nature of the English language. For this group, choosing a channel that broadcasts news in indigenous African languages was part of staying 'true' to the anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism 'course'. Looking broadly at the South African institutions of which SABC is part, they felt strongly that public institutions need to 'transform' and accommodate African languages, not the other way around. They saw English as part of re-colonisation. Most of them watched SABC News in African languages.

These young adult participants chose to watch SABC News on the grounds that it offered them an opportunity to access news in their own indigenous African languages, and not in English. As much as this is a personal and linguistic choice, it is simultaneously political in nature; it was/is also influenced by the Corporations' perceived stance on representing indigenous languages in its presentation of newscasts. The perception was that, unlike e.tv that broadcast news in English only, the SABC accommodates people of various language groups. Said a Pretoria-based black working-class male participant: "*I prefer SABC news ... SABC caters for people who do not understand English. That is why they have news in all the languages.*" Another stated: "*SABC is more interesting for me because news is presented in my home language.*"

Although there is as yet no scientific proof, one senses a tone of 'political/cultural/ideological acceptance' of the SABC News by young black males in this study. "I prefer" seems to suggest political solidarity with "**people who do not understand English**". Though this respondent's choice of words in describing his choice of SABC News is not necessarily for 'him', it is in solidarity with *my people*. This acceptance of the SABC can be sensed from other respondents' responses, which seem to say that the SABC 'does not allow my home language to die': "*... news is presented in my home language*". In essence, particular SABC news texts are chosen as an extension and accommodation of 'home' and 'home language'. Once again one comes across language, a socialising public medium, as a primary determinant in the choice of a particular news channel.

Had these young working-class black males been born and socialised in a different sociocultural space, their conceptualisation of 'home' and home language' in relation to SABC news texts would arguably have been different. This 'difference' in respect of relating to news channels manifests itself differently when we look at white middle-class youth in this study.

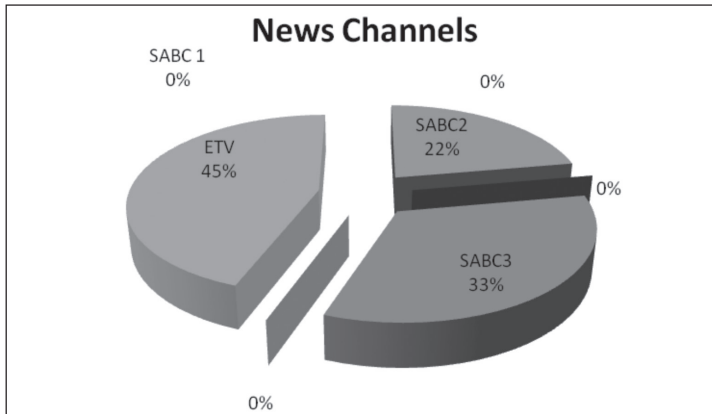


Figure 1.3 News channels likely to be watched by young white females

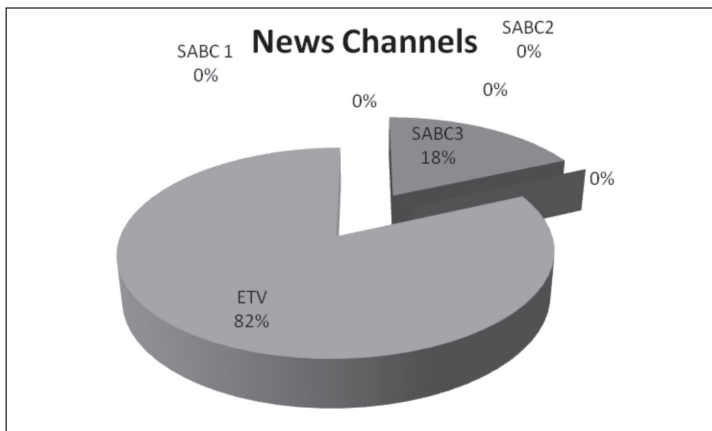


Figure 1.4 News channels likely to be watched by young white males

That the choice of a news channel is an ideological decision is reflected in young white adults' preference for e.tv above any other SABC channel. Young adult whites, more especially white males, felt alienated by SABC News which they viewed as an extension of the post-apartheid political space – one that excluded 'them'. They saw in e.tv an independent channel, critical of government, and subversive of the SABC news ideology.

As the above graphs indicate, the majority of white participants showed least preference for the SABC News across all its channels. These participants observed that the SABC news texts were dominated by political news stories. One middle-class white participant boldly asserted: *"I hate SABC; they always have (Thabo) Mbeki [now South African former president]*

on for ages as the first story. SABC always has a long story first, about where Mbeki has been each day. It is always political." This protest is supported by another middle-class participant: *"I agree ... SABC has too many political stories up first, which are only [featured] half way through on e.tv."* Another frequent middle-class male viewer concurred: *"There is definitely not much politics on e.tv."* In this context, the SABC News offering is incongruent with these young adults' ideological horizon of expectations.

The young white participants' concerns regarded the manner in which the SABC set the political agenda and ideologically framed Thabo Mbeki. This tension is not just happening in the private sphere of the reader (white youth) and the text (SABC News), but it is a product of ideological tensions transposed from the broader South African political public sphere to the private sphere. Without a socialising political, cultural and lived-experience frame to guide judgment of 'objectivity' and 'propaganda', white youth here had no sociocultural capital with which to conclude whether SABC was biased or not or with which to read the SABC – in application of John Fiske's (1987) concept of polysemy – differently than did black youth.

You find the exactly the same news clip on both channels, but on SABC 3, it's first and [on] e.tv it's fourth or fifth in the line up. Also, SABC edits all the clips to show positive things about Mbeki. Both channels show the same snippet but SABC shows Mbeki shaking hands with everyone and e.tv shows the masses striking behind him."
(Cape Town-based white middle-class respondent)

In terms of Hall's (1980) reading positions, this interpretation of an SABC 3 News text produces oppositional reading. These young adults 'see through' SABC's subscription to the dominant ideology – as an agent of ANC's hegemony. This reading of the SABC differs to how, for example, many young black males read SABC 1 and SABC 2 news texts.. Their criticism of the SABC was quite restrained and they presented dominant readings of SABC News. This polysemic reading of SABC News reflects ideological differences among young adults produced by their socialisation.

There is another aspect to this that can be explained through reception theory, more especially Wolfgang Iser's (1974; 1978) notion of the implied reader. Iser sees the act of reading to be "... a process by which the reader traverses the text, both in an initial and successive readings, closing 'gaps' and filling 'blanks' so as to make work consistent" (Brooker, 1999: 189). Iser's conception of an active reader is of one who interprets literary work by filling blanks in the text with his/her knowledge, experiences and frame of reference – these being inescapable part of the reader's social and cultural life world (Pitout, 2001).

The above response is characterised by intensity in comparing SABC and e.tv news products, a sign of a very active and deep reading. Above all, this respondent, as did others, employed gained/inherited knowledge, experiences and frames of reference to point to the ideological 'gaps' in SABC News' framing of Thabo Mbeki. Also, the reader articulates his ideological concerns by pointing to the aesthetic or compositional aspects of both e.tv and SABC news texts. Differences can also be identified in the issue of English.

White youth in general took the issue of the use of English by SABC 3 reporters seriously, albeit differently than did their black counterparts. White youth felt that SABC news reporters in particular lacked proficiency in their use of English, a factor they blamed squarely on affirmative action appointments.

"It's like the presenters are fine, then you get the news reporters on the field and then you can't hear a thing. It's the accent which I know isn't politically correct with this whole affirmative action good for you but if you can't understand them then what's the point of them being there?" (Cape Town-based white middle-class male respondent)

In this quotation, the broader and intense debates occurring in the South African public sphere play themselves out in the interpretation of news. This respondent, and others like him in focus-group discussions, only found political words to describe the issue of linguistic 'incompetence' – e.g., affirmative action. The concern about accent, which black youth never raised, reflects not only how rigidly South African society is structured along cultural lines, but also the fact that each stratum of the social structure either legitimises or rejects certain accents. By complaining about the accent in the text, this respondent evaluates and reads SABC news texts against standards *set* and *approved* by his world in terms of what a good accent ought to sound like. He borrows from his ideology to read compositional/aesthetic and signifying aspects of the text (e.g. language).

5.2 Research question 2: How likely are you to watch local television news for the following kinds of programming?

1. National news
2. International news

The moderator's leading of this question in focus-group discussions, though other questions were equally probed, set the motivation to watch national news against the interest in watching international news. The reason for this was to investigate, against socialisation theory, whether young adults, because of their social positions, would be motivated to watch these news categories differently.

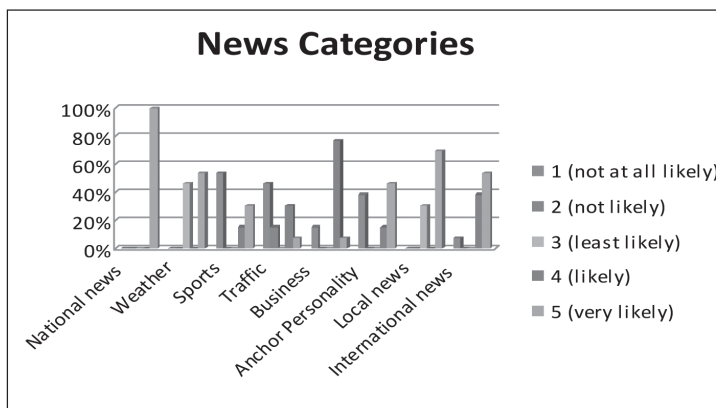


Figure 1.5 News categories likely to be watched by young black females

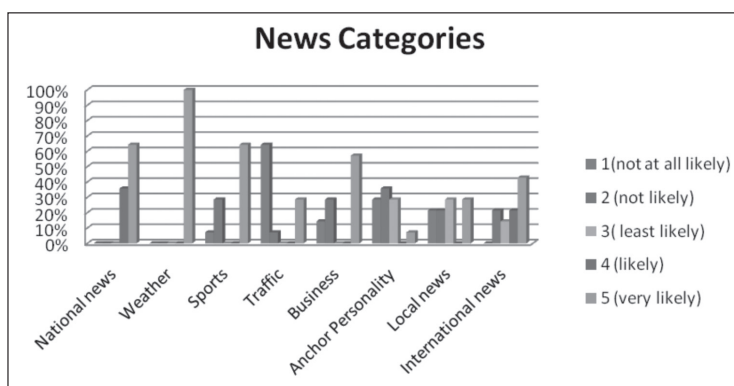


Figure 1.6 News categories likely to be watched by young black males

All young adults' high preference for national news rather than international news was indicative of their general strong interest in national affairs and also their willingness to know about them. But as demonstrated below, social class and gender mediated both choice and reading of the particular news category.

Working-class black young adults were more likely to watch television news for national issues, with more young black females interestingly indicating high preference. The plausible rationale for this preference was that the national stories were literally about local issues that were immediate and affected them almost directly. An examination of the SABC news provision, which most working-class young adults mostly preferred, strongly indicated that SABC catered more for local news needs. Working-class young adults positioned themselves as concerned citizens of the South African public sphere.

These participants who demonstrated high motivation for viewing news for its coverage of national events were largely based in the Pretoria region, were of working-class economic status, were living at home and were oriented towards SABC 3 and also towards other SABC channels broadcasting in South African indigenous languages.

Questioned about their restrained motivation to watch national news on e.tv, these participant responses pointed not only to specific interests in national issues but also to internalised construction of oneself as a national citizen subject, a subjectivity that is produced by socialisation. Characterising this group was a sense of discomfort with e.tv's narrow coverage of a 'nation' as a whole. One Pretoria-based working-class student originally from Mpumalanga stated: *"One of the things I do not like about e-news is that it mainly covers Cape Town and Durban; it rarely focuses on other provinces such as Mpumalanga, Limpopo ..."* Working-class students' personal willingness to know from news also translated to the feeling of willingness to know about broader national and local issues. For these young adults, the problem with e.tv, unlike their mostly preferred SABC, was that it 'shrunk' the nation: *"For me the SABC ... it is because they focus more on local news and stuff. I am more interested in local news than international news. I want to know what is happening in Pietersburg (now Polokwane), KZN, etc."* Another added: *"I prefer SABC 1 because it focuses on my background. SABC 1 talks about South Africans. It is about national news."*

It is interesting to note that when working-class students criticise e.tv for not being wide enough in its coverage of national issues, they not only criticised it for not reporting on their specific provinces but also for not reporting on others. While these students did not see themselves as being largely global citizens, they did however construct themselves as being largely national citizens.

The SABC allowed this citizenship to happen for them and they, in turn, allowed themselves to become one with the SABC's version of constructing and demarcating the parameters of the meaning of the South African nation. The SABC itself draws not only from political, geographical and policy discourse but also from its specific mandate in its construction of the South African nation, one that is largely accepted by black youth.

The extent to which working-class black youth are 'inward-looking' and more nationalistic than their middle-class counterparts (see below) is a political one, and it needs to be traced to the political 'aura' within which black working-class youth always find themselves in South African society. Mass media always show that these youths are the ones who still attend political rallies. Second, because their quality of life is directly linked to the changes in the political system, they are always interested in national issues.

Scrutiny of the relationship existing between working-class young adults who largely live at home and public service broadcaster (SABC) television reveals interesting information. First, while, as it can be seen below, middle-class white young adults were 'turned off' by SABC News because of its political orientation, working-class young adults followed SABC News because it prioritised national news.

This pattern cannot simply be explained either by speculations as to whether or not young adults are losing interest in television news, or through the uses and gratifications theory with its emphasis on individualised and psychological-based consumption of media consumption; this is a pattern that reveals a more class-based and racialised form of media choice, more especially for ideologically contested texts such as television news.

It is partly for these reasons that this study is premised on the presupposition that textual reading and perception are sociocultural imports; in other words, human subjects' reading and perception of texts, in this case young adult South African's reading/reception of locally-produced television news, are products of socialisation and cultururation.

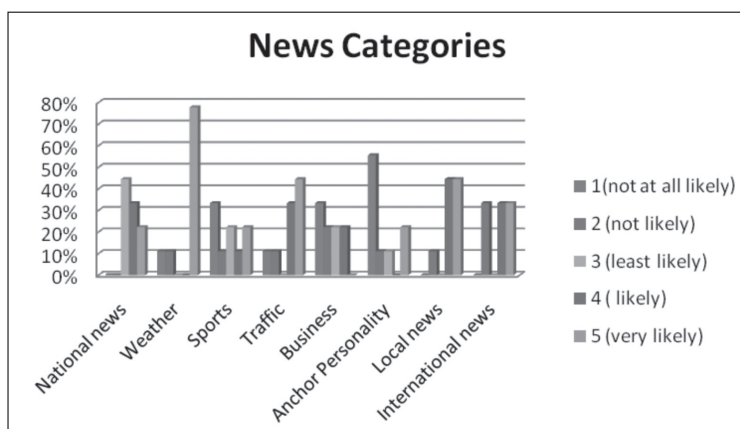


Figure 1.7 News categories likely to be watched by young white females

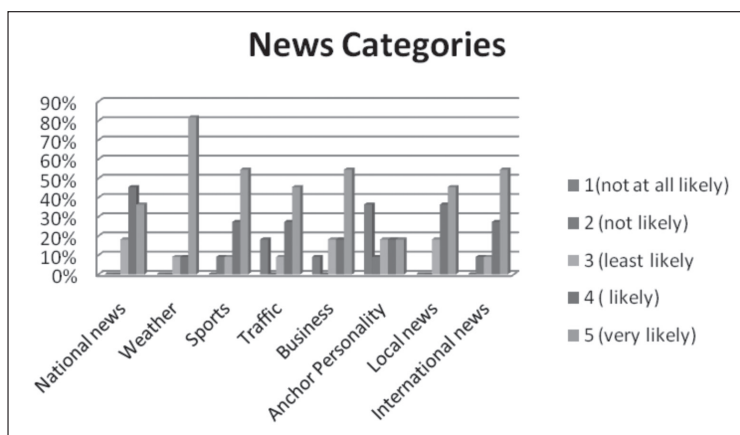


Figure 1.8 News categories likely to be watched by young white males

Middle- and upper-class focus-group participants tended to demonstrate a low preference for national government-orientated stories, and they were likely to change channels if such stories came up. *"It is not pre-determined, it depends on the subject. But if it is a government thing, I am likely to change to another channel,"* commented a white middle-class female respondent on choosing national news. The value of applying qualitative focus-group research should be noted in this answer. Where, for example, quantitative research would only have revealed the news category preferred by middle-class participants, the focus-group form of questioning reveals, through this answer, that even when one is motivated to watch national news as a specific category, one is more likely to change channel in the middle of the story if the content of the category is a national government-related story.

The following Cape-Town-based middle-class respondent revealed the reason: *"I agree. I think international news gets my attention more. I think it is just the politics (national) ... I do not really understand it – I do not know who is who. So I don't really watch that (national aspect of news)."* Another Cape Town-based middle-class participant explained this negative reaction to national news with strong political content: *"I find the local news often like, oh well, this politician went here and that one went there."*

An understanding of these negative reactions to certain aspects of nation lies in the relationship between white youth and the South African (political) public sphere. Had they, in the country's less than fourteen years of democracy taken ownership of it? Had the (political) public sphere itself accommodated them or had it 'displaced them into the privacy of the home? Why would she *"not know who is who"* in the local body politic? One senses a feeling of psychological and political displacement. White middle-class young adults did not feel they belonged in the realm of local political sphere whose dominant criticism made constant references to the failures of the ruling African National Congress. Another white middle-class participant added:

Generally I am quite interested in the international news. Last year I was more interested in the national news because of the elections (South Africa's third democratic National Elections in 2004).

In this response too, as in the responses of black working-class young adults, the motivation to watch was linked to the perceived manner in which political changes impact on one's environment, in this case the election process and its results. Ordinarily, this participant's life is not dependent on day-to-day political happenings of the country as is the case for working-class youth. Generally young adults, it needs to be argued, internalise their social space and their place in it.

I agree. I think I much prefer to watch something much more international. Parliament is not interesting ... certain things like when the Pope died my family had news on like constantly, when the Tsunami happened, my mother was watching like constantly."(White middle-class young adult)

“Parliament is not interesting”; what is interesting is “when the Pope died” and “when the Tsunami happened”. These are actual examples that not only reveal motivation to watch international news, accompanied by the construction of oneself as a global citizen, but they also reveal a particular form of reception of international news that is influenced by the need for ‘bigger’ and ‘shocking’ news: the Pope’s death and Tsunami. This trend is confirmed by another middle-class participant:

When there is something bigger, I saw something on (sic) the newspaper. National news tends to be extremely boring too. On the day of the September 11 I watched the news the whole day.

For ‘outward-looking’ middle-class young adults international news is about big non-boring happenings that make them stay away from the monotony of “*this politician went here and that one went there*”⁴.

There is another important point in the above response: it anchors the point previously made in this article regarding the social capital that participants bring into reading television news. Young adults read other media and they carry information obtained from these into their reading of television news.

The notions of polysemy, implied reader, dominant, negotiated and oppositional reading, together with other concepts that define the processes of text reading by readers all arguably point to that panoply of beliefs, values and interpretive codes that together constitute the reception of texts and also to the fact that reading – whether accepting or rejecting texts – entails borrowing from pre-existing forms of meaning. Rather than treat young adults’ ‘texts’ as being original and autonomous wisdoms about television news texts, one should rather view them as channels through which the various strata of the South African society speak.

Young adults in this study ‘enter’ the world of SABC and e.tv news texts either as inhabitants of either economically-depressed townships or of up-market suburbs. South Africa’s sociocultural spaces are structured by a history of inequality, ‘difference’ and ‘othering’. These are social spaces not only inherent with meaning-imposing signs but they also configure young adults’ subjectivities of reading. These spaces empower them both with sociocultural language and means of either making sense or with frames of reference. These worlds provide them with pre-established symbols and interpretive frames that make it possible for supposedly ‘self-contained’ and ‘free-floating’ textual signs to signify or to, culturally and ideologically, *mean* something, not only in general but also in terms of their immediate political spaces.

Also, young adults in this study are active text readers who self-reflectively disassociate with *outgroups*. This process mirrors the deeper politically inspired gender, racial and class identity

⁴ The fact that people prefer ‘shocking’ or ‘interesting’ stories – local, national or international – above politics is a general phenomenon and cannot be tied to one segment of the population only.

struggles historically produced by a particular sociocultural environment. The theoretical framework through which this *tentative* conceptual position is articulated in this study is a synthesis of qualitative research methodology, socialisation theory and reception aesthetics. This begs further exploration.

Importantly also, young adult South Africans' television-viewing choices point to the difficulty of creating a harmonious, socially cohesive public sphere or solidarity across sociocultural categories. In South Africa, whether historically or futuristically, we need to talk of multiple public spheres, not a single overarching public sphere.

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