

Television of, by, and for the Poor? On Suffering and Media Ethics

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A Review of

The Poverty of Television. The Mediation of Suffering in Class-Divided Philippines.

by Jonathan Corpus Ong (2015)

London and NY: Anthem Press

As I write this, I am aware that *The Poverty of Television* (Ong, 2015) has already achieved recognition as an exemplary scholarly work. For it, Jonathan Ong recently received a “VAM,” a Virginia A. Miralao Award for Excellence in Research for young (under 40) social scientists, from the Philippine Social Science Council. Certainly, the book illustrates the ideal trajectory for a young scholar, a PhD project seen through to printing and publication. And the applause is well-deserved. Ong’s observations on the production and reception of TV programs distinct to the Philippine setting are important. The book discusses how news programs and shows like *Wowowee* are premised on distinct interactions and expectations between viewers and networks, and tellingly reveals how they relate to social class divides in Philippine society. Furthermore, this material challenges ethical discourse on media, and the author takes great pains to expound on the implications.

The phrase “poverty of television” in the title refers to how poverty is predominantly on display on Philippine television. It also points to TV’s main audience, namely, the lower class majority of the Filipino population who are, by virtue of poverty, inherently more exposed and vulnerable to “suffering.” It moreover casts a critical eye on television, because the media is “intertwined with and reproductive of long-existing class differences and inequalities in Philippine society” (p. 8).

The focus is on the audience, as the study explores the perspectives and agency of TV viewers. A key finding is that the consumption of television, media practices, and characteristic relationships and interactions between broadcast corporations and their audiences are fundamentally “classed.” In parallel, and drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s (1992) assertions regarding social class as culture, I suppose that this also implies that one could potentially explore the “luxury of newspaper broadsheets” for the kind of elite morality and respectability celebrated in its society pages, or the “urban middle-class-ness of social media” with its selfie-production. Although—I wonder if I got it right? Perhaps by “poverty of television” the author is also owning up to a predisposition to seeing television media as idiot box? I say this because the book comes to a close with a disturbing postscript contending that under increased influence from social media, Philippine television may now be swinging towards a denial of poverty, leading to a new “crisis of representation in the mediation of suffering” in which “the emerging *poverty of television* [emphasis added] lies not in its traditional excesses, shock effect and noisy sensationalism but in its soothing, eerie silence and absence” (Ong, p. 175).

The stated project of *Poverty of Television* is to engage with a body of literature relating to media ethics and mediation theory (authors Silverstone, and Chouliaraki, and Das, are among those often cited) that tends to assume “distance” between representations of “suffering” and the audience that should feel compassion. But the study directly challenges the (Western normative) assumptions as Ong finds that poverty (hence “suffering”), is a proximal context for Philippine TV—both for the audience as well as for the media institutions engaged in producing the programs. As Ong points out, for television within a developing and disaster-prone country like the Philippines, suffering is not “out there” but “in here”:

Poverty and suffering are treated in this book not only as media content, but as social conditions, material realities and embodied individual selves [emphasis in the original] that television interacts with through their diverse modes of professional practice: storytelling, reporting, interviewing, fundraising, rescuing and giving aid . . . (T)he everyday experience of poverty by those with the greatest intimacy with television (both as content and also as institution) informs the political economy of mass media institutions, the aesthetics of their productions and the process of direct interactions between media people and ordinary people. (Ong, p. 3)

The book immediately reveals how, in the Philippines, it is currently the classes D-E, or the *masa* (masses or common folk) crowd, who devotedly watch local TV shows. The rich have already “switched off”—in fact, turned off by, and critical of, the over representation (read: exploitation) of poverty and suffering on local TV, so they tune in to the cable networks and foreign shows instead, just as they also tend to stick to “zones of safety” and avoid direct contact with the lower classes. (The middle classes skate between the two poles, more able to empathize with the lesser off, emulating the better off, and meanwhile having relatively less time to sit in front of the screen).

Distinct features of Philippine television become understandable from its contextualization in audiences’ socialization in, or relative distance from, the “culture of everyday suffering” (Ong, p. 5). Poverty of television also illuminates diverse phenomena such as the popularity of lining up to participate in noontime TV shows, media interventions like full-scale charity work (unique to the Philippines, and even outdoing government agencies), and how an event like the *Wowowee* stampede disaster could happen in 2006.

Material for the book was gathered in a 20-month ethnography of TV programs and their audiences in different sites in Metro Manila in 2009 and 2011. The appendix cites several spaces or zones selected by the author to represent “upper,” “middle” and “lower” class segments of the population, as well as specific media production contexts where the author relates that he “hung out,” or took part through volunteer work, or engaged in participant observation even if only by watching television together with others. Excerpts of transcripts of individual and group interviews, in English translation (I would have wished for the verbatim), representing voices from different classes, are presented in the text. Summary tables at times map out the moral responses of viewers toward certain TV programs across different classes. Considering it as (multi-sited) ethnography, it feels like anecdotal field notes are somewhat scarce in the book compared to other kinds of supportive data. *Poverty of Television* is not exactly one of those books that that one enjoys reading straight through because there are many redundancies in Ong’s writing—repeated citing of points that were already established earlier in the text, repeated foregrounding of future points to be made, so the book sometimes tends to get a bit tedious. But on the analytical level many portions of the text are I would say brilliant; these redundancies do their work admirably if the exposition is viewed as an extended philosophical treatise.

Speaking as a social anthropologist (not a philosopher of ethics, and a beginner in media studies) I appreciate this book’s contribution to Philippine ethnography in its nuancing of perspectives and social engagement by class.

As its author notes, the finding of great divergences between the practices and moral judgments of upper, middle and lower classes offers challenges to “essentialist anthropologies” such as pronouncements on “Filipino morality” (e.g. Jocano, 1997) and “Filipino culture of disaster” (cf Bankoff, 2003).

I will recap some of the observations and insights from various parts of the book’s chapters that caught my attention, and that hopefully might also interest readers of this journal.

The book commences with two rather densely written chapters. The first surveys literature revolving around three themes: media ethics, the “anthropology of moralities,” and “suffering” (including a brief review of Philippine Studies writings touching on class politics in everyday life). The second chapter purports to theorize “mediated suffering.” It notes also as context the “dynamic non-linear ‘circuit of culture’” (Hall, 1997, p. 1) such that—given how media has become so much a part of social life—analysis of “production” of media texts and their “reception” by the audience also needs to consider expectations, consequences and relationships beyond those two “moments.” This leads the author to a threefold typology of ethical concerns: “textual ethics” (the representation of suffering), “audience ethics” (how audiences respond to the text), and “ecological ethics” (the ethics of the media process; of the direct interactions between media and audience in this process). Using this approach justifies and requires a holistic methodology: ethnography. This chapter also provides an overview and history of the Philippine “media landscape.”

Chapter 3 is about “audience ethics.” It includes an overview of “class” and access to media in the Philippine context where, “in spite of dramatic income inequalities present in Filipino (and in this case, Manila) society, the same media technologies and platforms are nevertheless within reach of people regardless of income” (Ong, p. 66). But the author then goes on to expose how viewer practices (and their moral judgments) diverge dramatically by class. We hear poor people say they watch television because they are underemployed—going out entails costs and risks, so they have to stay at home and there they have nothing to do but watch TV. But then, as a real option for the poor, and demonstrating further the centrality of TV to impoverished lives, they could opt to visit a media network either to solicit help directly or to try their luck so that it would be themselves on television, and which entails sacrificing hours of standing in line for the chance to take part in a noon-time game show (“pilgrimage to the mediated center”). Viewers from middle and upper class audiences by contrast tend to consider appearing on television in this manner to be an embarrassing experience, and from their perspective emerges the put-down of TV programming as *jologs* which the author considers to be a “word of hatred” (denigrating the

noisy, tacky, or kitschy taste of the lower classes [Note: the same as *baduy*?]. (I found Ong's comparison of *jologs* with the British term "chav" interesting, although I felt it was incomplete. My own impression is that *jologs* relates to the character and style of lower class youth.)

Chapter 4 is all about the controversial *Wowowee*, a noontime show that I always thought to be of great sociological interest as episodes often featured game show contestants selected along specific social variables (e.g. being a PWD, or abandoned child), as Ong describes, the show would then feature their narratives of "suffering" in "confessional format." After their tearful stories were extracted by the show's host, participants might be instantly rewarded with cash even before playing. Ong observes how lower class viewers evaluated the show's participants along criteria of "authenticity" and "deservingness," and how vicariously apprehending others' more dire straits could also be like therapy for one's own suffering. By contrast, viewers from the upper classes tended to judge participants as victims exploited by the media for profit, unwitting performers of "poverty porn" exposed to shame and loss of dignity in a process which also makes the viewers into witnesses of the redistributive, hence influence-generating, munificent transactions of the *Wowowee* host-patron (television's "big man" in anthropological jargon).

Chapter 5 is about local news, and further proves the centrality of television to the lives of the poor. There are many important insights and observations here. I will just cite a few. Of note is how some media personalities cross over to careers in public service and seek to become elected officials. It was a surprise for me to learn that in some areas media institutions run microfinance programs, and actually lend money directly to viewers (on condition of network loyalty). Another revelation is the finding that the charity work of media derives most of its funds from coin bank donations, which is also because the upper classes have "switched off" from local television.

...[M]edia charity appears to be a loop of mutual aid and cooperation within zones of danger. This reflects traditional models of bayanihan that are practised within poor communities to ward off anticipated disaster . . . because the upper class generally traverses the metropolis within zones of safety where these ABS-CBN coin banks are not often present, charity for them more often occurs outside the media... (Ong, 2015, p. 142)

As for the critique of television, in many places in the book, Ong turns to a loftier vantage point in Philippine sociology and cites Randy David's decades-old comment calling for social analysis of the causes of deprivation and inequality (such as conflicting class interests). As he notes, while TV programs can function as a "mediated space" for cathartic expression of suffering experiences, television narratives mostly tend to focus on individual "coping mechanisms" rather than larger structural constraints. In relation to "media power," the study has also underscored that the process of production and the nature of the interactions between all the people involved needs to be critiqued.

In the concluding chapter, Ong reiterates the emotional logic and strategies—or what he calls "lay media moralities"—underlying classed audiences' evaluation of and response to representations of "suffering" on Philippine TV shows. He does succeed in articulating these moral frameworks as expressions of "media criticism," and in bringing them to dialogue with the media ethics literature (he had earlier made the point [attributed to Couldry] that everyone needs to be engaged in discussion of media ethics). This is another dense chapter, that additionally poses the problem of "whose lay media moralities are correct?" (Ong, 2015, p. 167). Media's ethical challenge then is to facilitate "discourses of compassion" that cut across social classes. Grounded in the case of Philippine television, Ong provides orienting guide questions that may help to address the dilemma.

References

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