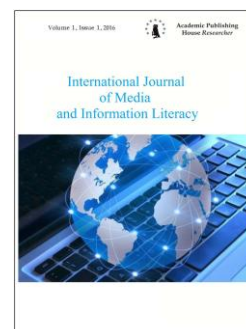


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Approaches to International Media Literacy: Cultural Habits of Thought

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Abstract

The media have become so pervasive throughout the globe that the ability to decipher messages conveyed through the media has become a 21st century survival skill. Indeed, in 2011, participants in the First International Forum on Media and Information Literacy (in which the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – UNESCO – is the lead partner) issued a Declaration, in which they affirmed that Media and Information Literacy is a “fundamental human right.” International Media Literacy focuses on what members of the media literacy community can learn from one another with regard to media literacy principles, concepts, programs, and strategies. Media literacy scholars apply those strategies that most effectively approach the study of media and media presentations in their cultures. Within this context, it can be useful to identify the media literacy principles, concepts, and approaches that are most effective in particular cultures. Further, it can be useful to consider other media literacy approaches that might offer a fresh perspective into that country’s media and media presentations.

Keywords: media literacy, media education, UNESCO, cultural habits, thought, people, students.

1. Introduction

In his seminal work *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently...And Why*, Social Psychologist Richard Nisbett made the startling pronouncement that that people from different cultures *think* differently. Nisbett asserts that cultural factors such as Geography, History, Religion, Language, Social Practices (i.e. rules of conduct) – and media presentations – contribute to a culture’s distinctive Habits of Thought. These Habits of Thought influence a culture’s *Worldview*; that is, its fundamental understanding about the nature of the world. As an example, Nisbett cites a historical instance in which the topography of Greece has influenced its relationship with the outside world:

“The ecology of Greece, consisting mostly of mountains descending to the sea favored occupations...that require relatively little cooperation with others. The Greeks had the luxury of attending to objects, including other people and their own goals with respect to them without being overly constrained by their relations with other people. A Greek could plan a harvest, arrange for a relocation of his herd of sheep, or investigate whether it would be profitable to sell some new commodity, consulting little or not at all with other people This might have made it natural for the Greeks to focus on the attributes of objects with a view toward categorizing them and finding the rules that would allow prediction and control of their behavior. Causality would be seen as due to properties of the object or as the result of one’s own actions in relation to the

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object. Such a view of causality could have encouraged the Greek assumptions of stability and permanence as well as an assumption that change in the object was under their control” (Nisbett, 2003: 34).

Indeed, a culture’s Habits of Thought can even affect a person’s primal dispositions, such as sensory perception. For instance, researchers have recently discovered that the Jahai, rain-forest foragers on the Malay Peninsula, have a highly developed sense of smell, in part because their very survival has depended on this manner of perceiving and understanding their environment. The study concludes, “Sensory perception is as much about the cultural training of attention as it is about biological capacity.” (Luhmann, 2014) Thus, understanding a society’s Habits of Thought can furnish considerable perspective into a culture.

2. Materials and methods

This article focuses on identification of the media literacy principles, concepts, and approaches that are most effective in particular cultures. Further, it can be useful to consider other media literacy approaches that might offer a fresh perspective into that country’s media and media presentations.

3. Discussion

International Media Literacy

The media have emerged as one of the social institutions that reflect, reinforce, and shape cultural Habits of Thought. This relationship between media and culture is the foundation of International Media Literacy analysis. Media Literacy is a critical thinking skill that is applied to the source of most of our information — the media. This discipline offers a range of strategies that enables individuals to make independent and informed assessments about the information conveyed through print, film, radio, television, and the Internet. In addition, this area of study approaches media programming as a text that reflects, reinforces, and shapes cultural attitudes, behaviors, values, preoccupations, and myths. In this regard, the study of Media Literacy can furnish perspective into our global environment.

International Media Literacy is founded on the following theoretical principles:

- *People from different cultures construct media messages differently*
- *People from different cultures interpret media messages differently.*
- *Understanding a culture’s distinctive Patterns of Thought can provide insight into its media presentations.*
- *By extension, a culture’s media presentations can furnish perspective into its distinctive Patterns of Thought.*

Asian vs. Western Habits of Thought

In *The Geography of Thought*, Nisbett provides an extended comparison of Asian and Western cultures as an illustration of the relationship between Media and Culture.

In summary, the essential differences between these two cultures are as follows:

“East Asians live in an interdependent world in which the self is part of a larger whole; Westerners live in a world in which the self is a unitary free agent. Easterners value success and achievement in good part because they reflect well on the groups they belong to. Westerners value these things because they are badges of personal merit. Easterners value fitting in and engage in self-criticism to make sure that they do so; Westerners value individually and strive to make themselves look good. Easterners are highly attuned to the feelings of others and strive for interpersonal harmony; Westerners are more concerned with knowing themselves and are prepared to sacrifice harmony for fairness. Easterners are more likely to prefer controversy and debate; Westerners have faith in the rhetoric of argumentation in arenas from the law to political science.” (Nisbett, 2003: 76-77).

The distinctive Habits of Thought of these two cultures appear in its media presentations—specifically, through the following narrative elements:

Plot

A plot is a planned series of interrelated actions that result from conflicts between opposing forces. The storylines typically found in the narratives of these two cultures reflect the Worldviews

of these two cultures: while Western plots generally focus on *Explicit Content*, Asian storylines typically feature *Implicit Content*.

Explicit Content is a term that refers to the significant events and activities in a plot that are displayed through visible action. A handy way to understand this concept is that Explicit Content answers the question, “What is the media presentation about?” In response to this question, an individual will relate only the most important events in the story; otherwise, the answer might be as long as the program itself.

Implicit Content refers to those elements of plot that remain under the surface:

- What are the *motives* behind characters’ decisions and actions?
Motive answers the question *why* the characters behaved as they did?
- What are the *connections between events* that occur in the plot?
- What are the *connections between the characters* that occur in the plot?
- Are the *consequences* for characters’ actions made clear?

Western cultures operate according to a Worldview in which the world is governed by straightforward rules, which are used to control their environment. Nisbett explains: “*European thought rests of the assumption that the behavior of objects—physical, animal, and human — can be understood in terms of straightforward rules...Westerners have a strong interest in categorization, which helps them to know what rules to apply to the objects in question...*” (Nisbett, 2003: 162).

As a result, Western plots tend to emphasize dramatic (and easily identifiable) events such as violent scenes, special effects and sexual encounters. Moreover, Western narratives reflect its belief in a world delineated by Absolute categories. Thus, in American police dramas, no context is provided that provides insight into drug pushers: they simply appear as criminals and villains.

Finally, Western plots often overlook the *consequences* of events that were depicted in the narrative. To illustrate, at the conclusion of the film *Die Hard* (1988) protagonist John McClane (Bruce Willis) emerges from a building that has been decimated, with considerable loss of life, during the course of the narrative. But rather than reporting to the authorities to consider the extent of the damage and assign responsibility for the devastation, John simply ducks into a taxi with his wife and heads home to celebrate Christmas.

One reason for this type of resolution is a response to the audience’s desire that the protagonists live “happily ever after.” One formulaic conclusion in Western media is the Wedding; this scene contains the implicit promise suggests that the remainder of their lives will be free of the conflicts (including romantic problems) found throughout the film. This implied promise presumes that virtuous characters can assert control over their environment.

In contrast, in Asian culture, events are understood within the context of the total environment in which actions take place. While Western cultures operate according to a Worldview in which the world is governed by straightforward rules, Asians see the world in terms of *context* and *relationships*. Nisbett explains, “*Asians... attend to objects in their broad context. The world seems more complex to Asians than to Westerners...Understanding events always requires consideration of a host of factors that operate in relation to one another in no simple, deterministic way*” (Nisbett, 2003: 162).

As a result, Asian plots typically emphasize Implicit Content, in that meaning is derived from the total environment of the narrative, as defined by: 1) relationships between characters; 2) context; 3) relationship between events; and a focus on consequences. To illustrate, according to Michael Puit and Christine Lowe, Evil doesn’t appear in the form of a demonic character in Asian stories, but instead is a State of Being, originating in the relationships that we fall into in the course of our daily lives (Puit, Lowe, 2017).

Because these elements are often interrelated, Asian plots are generally more complex than their Western counterparts. Nisbett observes, “*European thought rests of the assumption that the behavior of objects — physical, animal, and human — can be understood in terms of straightforward rules...Westerners have a strong interest in categorization, which helps them to know what rules to apply to the objects in question...*” (Nisbett, 2003: 162).

Finally, the conclusion of Asian stories are not as definitive as their Western counterparts. As Nisbett observes, “*Under the best of circumstances control of outcomes (is) difficult.*” (Nisbett, 2003: 19). Consequently, the conclusions of Asian narratives devote considerable attention to the

obstacles that the characters will face as an extension of the conflicts that appeared throughout the narrative.

At its worst, Western plots are mere celebrations of action, featuring car chases and needless sexual and violent scenes. However, in Western tales, plot can be used to *reveal* characters and themes; during the course of the narrative, events reveal the inner nature of principle characters. Similarly, Asian stories rarely feature the engaging plot conflicts typically found in Western narratives in Asian media and critics regard the lack of action as a deficiency, as opposed to a shift in focus.

Characterization

In *A Handbook to Literature*, William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, describe Characterization as “The creation of images of imagination persons so credible that they exist for the reader as real...” (Thrall, Hibbard, 1960: 356-359). In addition, the characters may be regarded as the embodiment of cultural values. Indeed, the heroes and heroines who appear in media presentations heroic figures often prevail in media entertainment programming because of their adherence to the values that are esteemed within the culture. As Sir Galahad proclaimed in a poem by Lord Alfred Tennyson, “My strength is as the strength of ten because my heart is pure.” (Tennyson, 1869).

In this way, characterization furnishes considerable insight into the Habits of Thought with regard to Western *Individualism* and the Asian adherence to *Collectivism*. As political scientist Mushakoji Kinhide observes, Individualism “is grounded in the belief that man can freely manipulate his environment for his own purposes.” (Nisbett, 2003: 75). Nisbett elaborates as follows:

- Each individual has a set of characteristics, distinctive attributes. Moreover, people want to be distinctive — different from other individuals in important ways.
- People are largely in control of their own behavior; they feel better when they are in situations in which choice and personal preference determine outcomes.
- People are oriented toward personal goals of success and achievement; they find that relationships and group memberships sometimes get in the way of attaining these goals.
- People strive to feel good about themselves; personal successes and assurances that they have positive qualities are important to their sense of well-being.
- People prefer equality in personal relations or, when relationships are hierarchical, they prefer a superior position.
- People believe the same rules should apply to everyone — individuals should not be singled out for special treatment because of their personal attributes or connections to important people Justice should be blind.
- They...control events because they know the rules that govern the behavior of objects.” (Nisbett, 2003: xiii).

In Western media presentations, heroes are powerful figures who take control of the world of the media presentation, often against great odds. They are unique individuals who distinguish themselves from those around them, either by their appearance, talents, and accomplishments.

In contrast, Asian societies operate according to the principle of *Collectivism*. Collectivism is based on the belief in the community as a way to achieve a just society. As a result, Asian heroes are generally depicted as selfless figures who contribute to the common welfare, often sacrificing themselves for the good of their families. Indeed, there is no word for “individualism” in the Chinese language; the closest Chinese approximation is “selfishness.” (Nisbett, 2003: 51). Nisbett explains, “*The (ideal) individual works not for self benefit but for the entire family. Indeed, the concept of self advancement, as opposed to family advancement, is foreign to cultures that are steeped in the Confucian orientation.*” (Nisbett, 2003: 15).

Structure

Structure refers to the planned organization of a piece of literature. Contrasting the structure of the media presentations of these two cultures reflects differences with respect to their assumptions about *stability vs. change*. As discussed earlier, Westerners believe in the controllability of the environment, on the basis formal rules of logic, where Easterners see change as the natural course of events. Nisbett explains: “European thought rests of the assumption that

the behavior of objects – physical, animal, and human – can be understood in terms of straightforward rules... Westerners have a strong interest in categorization, which helps them to know what rules to apply to the objects in question... For Asians the world is seen much more in terms of relationships than it is for Westerners, who are more inclined to see the world in terms of static objects that can be grouped into categories.” (Nisbett, 2003: 162).

As a result, in Western media presentations, agents of change are regarded as villainous or, at least, threatening to the established order.

The formulaic structure of Western programs is: Order/Chaos/Order. At the commencement of the story, the world exists in Harmony. Soon, however, this state of Order is disrupted by an intrusion of some sort, such as a crime or romantic entanglement. The remainder of the story, then, focuses on the *restoration* of order.

In contrast, Asian stories tend to operate in a cyclical fashion. Far from being a threat, change presented as part of the natural order of thing and is welcomed as a part of life. As Nisbett observes, “Moving in endless cycles – is the basic pattern of movement in the Tao.” (Nisbett, 2003: 14).

Thus, although the Quest is a motif common to the literature of both cultures, the ultimate source of meaning in Eastern narratives is to be found in the *journey* as opposed to its *realization* in the conclusion of the story. As Nisbett explains, “Confucianism like Taoism is less concerned with finding the truth than with finding the Tao – the Way – to live in the world.” (Nisbett, 2003: 15).

Theme

According to Thrall, et. al, a theme is “the central or dominating idea in a literary work... An abstract concept which is made concrete through its representation in person, action, and image in the work.” (Thrall, Hibbard, 1960: 486). Thus, a culture’s Habits of Thought are frequently conveyed through the themes expressed in its media presentations. Examples of themes commonly found in Asian programming includes the following:

- *Yin-Yang* is a life principle in Asian cultures founded upon the notion of *duality*. According to *A Personal Tao: a guide to understanding Taoism*, “We encounter examples of Yin and Yang every day. As examples: night (Yin) and day (Yang), female (Yin) and male (Yang).” (Tao). The goal of Taoism is to achieve a balance of Yin and Yang. In that regard, Asian media programs often dramatize the complications and unhappiness caused by imbalances in life, caused by the excesses and deficiencies of Yin Yang.

- *The Doctrine of the Golden Mean* is a principle in which the goal of life is “To be excessive in nothing and to assume that between two propositions and between two contending individuals, there is truth on both sides.” (Nisbett, 2003: 15). Thus, media programs often dramatize the ongoing struggle to remain constant, stable, and centered in a world characterized by change.

- Nature stories focus on the *Relationship between Human Beings and Nature*. Taoist teachings recognize humans as products of Nature who are susceptible to natural impulses, failings, and wonders. In addition, narratives involving Nature can be interpreted as allegories about the human condition.

Setting

Setting refers to the physical background against which the action of a narrative takes place. The following cultural distinctions, as identified by Nisbett (Nisbett, 2003), influence how their audience members look at Setting.

- *Habits of organizing the world*, with Westerners preferring categories and Easterners being more likely to emphasize relationships.

- *Patterns of attention and perception*, with Easterners attending more to environments and Westerners attending more to specific objects, and Easterners being more likely to detect relationships among events than Westerners.

- Preferred patterns of *explanation for events*, with Westerners focusing on objects and Easterners casting a broader net to include the environment.

In Western films, television programs, and on the computer screen, the most important characters and events appear in the foreground, while the secondary elements remain in the background. Nisbett explains, (Westerners are) relatively blind to changes in objects in the background and to changes in relationships between objects, (whereas) Easterners pay relatively more attention to the background than do Westerners. (Nisbett, 2003: 93), Easterners and Westerners...behave in ways that (are) qualitatively distinct. Americans on average found it harder

to detect changes in the background of scenes and Japanese found it harder to detect changes in objects in the foreground.” (Nisbett, 2003: 191-192).

4. Results

International Media Literacy Analysis

International Media Literacy Analysis is an extension of the discipline of Media Literacy, focusing on ways in which media literacy principles, concepts, programs, and strategies can enhance cultural understandings. As discussed above, identifying a culture’s Habits of Thought can influence how its media communicators produce programs, as well as how its audiences make sense of media content. As Nisbett observes, “If Asians pay more attention to the environment than Westerners, we might expect that they would be more accurate in perceiving relationships between events.” (Nisbett, 2003: 95).

Once audience members from one culture understand how media communicators from another culture convey meaning (and why), that audience can learn to interpret its content and identify media messages.

To illustrate, New York Times columnist Nick Bilton (Bilton, 2018) relates the following example, in which the adoption of Japanese emoji (icons representing different emotional responses) by American adults led to a case of misinterpretation on the part of its Western audience: *“I recently had to sit my friend down for a modern-day digital intervention. It wasn’t that he was using his phone at dinner, or that he was hitting “reply all” on e-mail threads, or leaving unnecessary voice mail messages. No, this was much worse. A few weeks ago my friend, Michael Galpert, who is 30-year-old and is founder of SuperCalendar, a personal assistant Web site, lives in New York City and was visiting the West Coast for work. I set him up on a date with a friend who lives in Los Angeles. The first date went well and the two decided to see each other again. When Michael returned to New York, he and his new romantic interest started text messaging, and, as you often do if you are of a certain tech-savvy set, were communicating via emoji. As my colleague Jenna Wortham explained this year, emoji are the cartoonlike and more elaborate cousins of emoticons – those combinations of colons, parentheses and other punctuation that can convey expressions like a smile or a wink). The woman Michael was courting would type sweet nothings to him using emoji icons – a lady dancing, high heels or a martini with an olive – and this is where things went awry. Michael would respond with the “thumbs up” emoji, a hand that looks as if it belongs to an inflated cartoon character. When she would text “I’m excited to see you,” followed by a pink heart, Michael would respond with a thumbs up. The woman confided to me and a friend that she believed that based on his use of emoji, Michael was clearly not interested in her and just wanted to be friends. “It’s like he’s saying ‘Hey, dude’ or ‘Sure, bro’ when he sends me that emoji,” she told me. “It’s not cute.”*

As Greg Marra, a Facebook product manager, explained, *“We discovered that in the Asian culture, the expression on an emoji face isn’t necessarily what conveys emotion. It’s the context (emphasis mine) of where that face is located.”* In contrast, in the United States, the emotion on the face tells the story, not the surroundings.

Thus, Bilton observes that in Asian cultures, an emoji face in dark clouds would show that someone is sad and having a bad day, whereas a face on a beach with the sun glaring means that he/she is happy. Further, Marra points out that “stars for eyes could mean something completely different in Asia than using dots for eyes.”

Bilton concludes his anecdote as follows: “As for Michael, things didn’t work out with the woman he was inadvertently insulting. But he said he learned a lesson along the way. ‘I’m no longer using the thumbs-up emoji,” he said recently. “I’ve switched it out for the star emoji” (Bilton, 2018).

Thus, once the audience member learned to incorporate the *context* of the emoji into the interpretation of the message, he was better equipped to identify the intended media message. And conversely, media analysis can serve as a way to better understand another culture and its distinctive Habits of Thought.

A related Line of Inquiry involves applying the media literacy analysis strategies characteristic of another culture to the media presentations of one’s *own* media presentations as a way to furnish new perspectives into this programming.

An incident that occurred on the set of the Showtime cable series *Homeland* in 2015

illustrates this Line of Inquiry. For the first episode of its fifth season (entitled *Separation Anxiety*), the Art Director was asked to construct a set depicting a Syrian refugee camp. The backdrop of the set was a large wall, inscribed with Arabic graffiti. Because the graffiti was simply intended as Background, its content was overlooked by the show's producers. Amin explains, "The content of what was written on the walls ... was of no concern. In their eyes, Arabic script is merely a supplementary visual that completes the horror-fantasy of the Middle East, a poster image dehumanising an entire region to human-less figures in black burkas and moreover, this season, to refugees".

However, the slogans were designed and positioned by two street artists and activists, Heba Amin and Caram Kapp (Amin, Kapp, 2015), who had been approached to work on the set as freelance employees in Berlin, where the series was filmed. The graffiti included the following statements:

- This show does not represent the views of the artists."
- "Homeland is NOT a series
- Homeland is Racist
- Homeland is a joke, and it didn't make us laugh
- #blacklivesmatter
- Freedom ... now in 3D'
- Homeland is watermelon (which is slang for not to be taken seriously).
- The situation is not to be trusted

Amin and Kapp released the following explanation on the Internet: "*Given the series' reputation, we were not easily convinced, until we considered what a moment of intervention could relay about our own and many others' political discontent with the series. It was our moment to make our point by subverting the message using the show itself... We think the show perpetuates dangerous stereotypes by diminishing an entire region into a farce through the gross misrepresentations that feed into a narrative of political propaganda. It is clear they don't know the region they are attempting to represent. And yet, we suffer the consequences of such shallow and misguided representation*" (Amin, Kapp, 2015).

Thus, using "Setting" as an example, once Western audience members understand how Asian media communicators use the entire environment to convey meaning (and why), Western audiences can look beyond the foreground of the screen to gain additional understanding of media presentations produced in their own culture. As Reporter James Poniewozik observes, "...As the graffiti stunt proves, the little details, the way a culture is presented on screen, can be as important, and damaging, as the big political picture." Poniewozik continues, "Homeland" often uses scenes in which crowded streets in the Middle East and the Islamic...stand for a kind of alien, unintelligible chaos, a teeming welter of noise and dust and veils in which danger can lurk anywhere. Arguably, this kind of small detail is the greater problem with "Homeland" and other American dramas set in the region: the tendency to use the signifiers of a culture – clothes, music, street urchins, unfamiliar writing – as a kind of spicy Orientalist soup of otherness. Even in a well-intended drama, if you approach another culture as set decoration, in which the alien appearance matters more than the content, you risk sending a subtle but strong message: this is a terrifying, unknowable land where everything goes squibbly" (Poniewozik, 2015).

5. Conclusions

The media have become so pervasive throughout the globe that the ability to decipher messages conveyed through the media has become a 21st century survival skill. Indeed, in 2011, participants in the First International Forum on Media and Information Literacy (in which the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – UNESCO – is the lead partner) issued a Declaration, in which they affirmed that Media and Information Literacy is a "fundamental human right." (Declaration..., 2011).

International Media Literacy focuses on what members of the media literacy community can learn from one another with regard to media literacy principles, concepts, programs, and strategies. Media literacy scholars apply those strategies that most effectively approach the study of media and media presentations in their cultures. Within this context, it can be useful to identify the media literacy principles, concepts, and approaches that are most effective in particular cultures.

Further, it can be useful to consider other media literacy approaches that might offer a fresh perspective into that country's media and media presentations.

The following Lines of Inquiry can be applied to the study of media across cultures:

- *Applying a country's preferred media literacy principles, concepts, and approaches to interpret media presentations produced in that country.*
- *Considering other media literacy approaches that might offer a fresh perspective into that country's media and media presentations*
- *Analyzing the "habits of thought" in media presentations can provide insight into cultures in transition from one stage of cultural sensibility to another.*
- *Considering whether the approaches commonly employed in one country could be applied to the analysis of media presentations of another culture in order to provide perspective into that culture.*
- *Considering whether media literacy approaches employed in other countries might provide fresh insight into the media presentations of one's own country of origin.*

Although the immediate focus of this article is a comparative analysis of Asian and Western Habits of Thought, this discussion is intended to serve as a model for the comparative Media Literacy analysis involving other cultures. Media literacy scholars Sara Gabai and Nudee Nupairoj ("The Buddha's Media Literacy Teachings"), Pardeep Rae (Indian Vedic Pedagogy: Media Literacy) and Mourad Teyeb, Ali Miladi, and Mouna Msaddak (Tunisian Media and Information Literacy Project), among others, currently are examining the relationships between their cultures and media literacy analysis.

Beyond cheerleading the efforts of my colleagues, I encourage the media literacy scholars in other cultures to further our understanding of media as a cultural barometer.

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