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How does image modify comprehension
of television news programmes' content?

Introduction

Every day, several TV channels broadcast news on the most important events of the day. What's more, the fact that broadcasters have their news at different hours allows viewers to watch various news casts in one evening. They have a chance to obtain information on the same domestic and international events from different sources. Some take advantage of such an opportunity. Is it a waste of time? Apparently not. Generally, editors focus on similar or the same topics but prepare them in a different way. In consequence, viewers As a result, viewers watching the news on the same topic, differing both in terms of selection of specific content and form of presentation.hear and see varying commentaries to exactly the same events, see a different choice of detailed information as well as form of presentation. It can be expected that depending on the channel watched, one can obtain various images of a given event and, what is more, have a different understanding of broadcasted content. In other words, different is what will remain in the viewer's 'head' depending on which channel he/she watched, even though the same events were reported on.

The research carried out by the Department of Experimental Psychology at KUL and the Centre of Psychological Analysis of Social Communication in Lublin was aimed to check the scope and depth of understanding of different news from the same events, aired by the main Polish broadcasters: TVP1 (*Wiadomości* 19.30), TVP2 (*Panorama* 18.00), TVN (*Fakty* 19.00) and Polsat (*Wydarzenia* 18.50). The research regarded reports on anti-Chinese demonstrations in Tibet taking place in mid March of 2008. 1000 people, men and women between 25-65, with primary to higher education, living in small and big towns participated in the study. Every news casts were watched by 25% of the sample which allowed us to compare the level of understanding of the situation in Tibet by viewers of various TV channel news programmes.

Understanding was measured on several levels. The most basic level of understanding regards knowledge of words and idiomatic compounds. On this level of understanding of

audiovisual broadcast, the recipient should also have the ability to recognize selected fragments of visual material. The next level is understanding detailed information. In order to do so, one must possess the following skills: remember information included in the text, understand the sense broadcasted via text and image and understand space and time relations. The following level of cognition is being able to identify the leading thought or the main idea, identify and differentiate most important statements and assess intentions. The highest level of understanding regards identification of broadcast value by determining the cause and effect relations, formulating conclusions on a given subject, forecasting the outcome of the portrayed events and, finally, critical analysis of broadcast content.

Based on the above assumptions, several short test questions were prepared. They allowed an assessment of the level of understanding and for each level – the scope of understanding of the report on the situation in Tibet. Subjects answered the questions directly after watching the news report on one of the four selected channels.

The article focuses only on those task questions which showed a significant influence of broadcast on viewer interpretation of events. Generally, it can be said that as a result of too much text transmitted at a too fast pace, an image becomes the dominant source content which is processed. It ceases to play a supplementary role and it becomes the basis for comprehension. The results of research are presented by level of understanding, starting from presentation of detailed knowledge on the situation in Tibet (level 2), identification of main idea of the news (level 3) and determining cause and effect relationships (level 4).

Knowledge of detailed information

Detailed knowledge of news content regards time, place, participants and also the course of events presented.. This is contextual knowledge. It could be of general character, dictionary based or even more specific – encyclopaedic. Knowledge of detailed information is necessary in order to understand the broadcast's main idea.

Questions in analysed task referred to comprehend the presented events. Answers to these could be formulated based on viewer's prior knowledge or from information included in the news report. Broadcasters, as every sender of each messages, assume a certain level of recipient knowledge on a given subject. This is one reason for the variations in reports by different broadcasters. Despite the fact that the same event is reported on, news authors select basic additional information differently. In result, viewers of various channels can construct different images of the same events. In order to check whether there are such differences, the surveyed were asked identical questions, regardless of the channel they watched.

It was assumed that if a viewer answered a question correctly, even though this information was not given in the report, he used earlier obtained knowledge. If, however, in such a situation he can not give the correct answer , it means that the mental representation of events is incomplete and the broadcaster wrongly assumed that he already had this knowledge. If, on the other hand, this information was given but the recipient was not able to recall it, it could mean an error in the stage of information coding. This could be the broadcaster's fault, ie. regarding speed of transmission or report's other structural characteristics such as editing cuts or audio-video redundancy. Or it could be the recipient's fault, ie. lack of interest or basic knowledge on the subject. Finally, if the report included the information and the viewer was able to recall it, it means that transfer of information content was effective and that it was incorporated into the cognitive representation of a given event.

In order to examine the extent of detailed knowledge of four recipients of news about events in Tibet, , six questions were asked: 1) how many people, according to unofficial statistics, died in Tibet?, 2) what is the capital of Tibet?, 3) who is the Dalai Lama?, 4) who killed the victims?, 5) what is the goal of protests organized in Western countries?, 6) when are the Olympics in Beijing? These were multiple choice questions, with one correct answer out of three. In the end, every person obtained a percentage score based on correctly answered questions.

The news reports gave answers to only some of these questions. For example, although the Dalai Lama was mentioned in all broadcasts, not all reports said who he is. Also, some journalists used the name Lhasa, not explaining that it is the capital of Tibet. What's more, the Olympics date was not always mentioned. Additionally, there were some differences in the reported number of people killed in Tibet.

Analysis of detailed information on anti-Chinese demonstrations in Tibet for all those surveyed showed that the difficulty level of questions asked varied ($F(6;243) = 361.97$; $p<0,001$). 70% of viewers did not specifically know who the Dalai Lama is, while 80% could state the reason for the demonstrations. As far as the other questions, roughly 50% was answered correctly.

The scope of knowledge on the subject depended on which news channel the viewers watched ($F(3;245) = 2,77$; $p<0.042$) – see Figure 1.
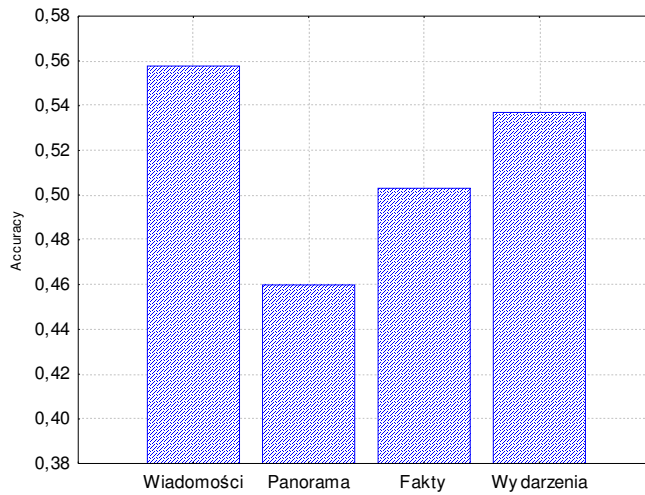
Figure 1. Scope of detailed knowledge on anti-Chinese demonstrations in Tibet,
by news channel

After watching *Wiadomości* viewers possessed greater knowledge on the Tibet situation than viewers of *Panorama* (HSD: $p<0.037$). In order to explain this difference, carried out was a detailed analysis of those questions to which answers varied depending on the channel watched. These regarded: the date of the Beijing Olympics ($F(3;245) = 2.41$; $p<0.068$), Tibet's capital ($F(3;245) = 6.50$; $p<0.001$) and the Dalai Lama ($F(3;245) = 4.01$; $p<0.008$) – see Figure 2).
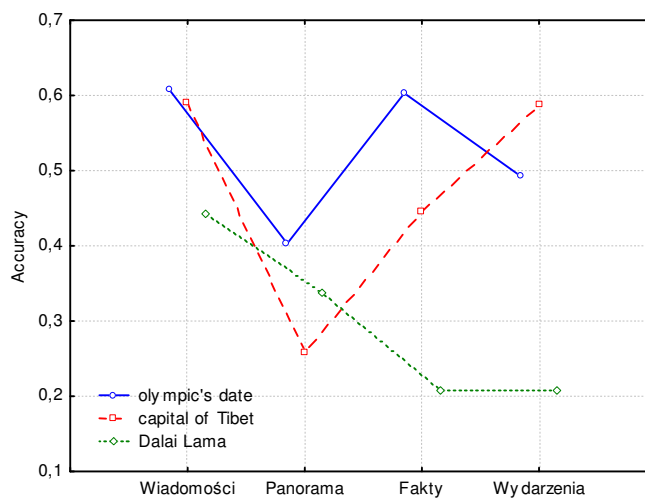

Figure 2. Viewer knowledge regarding the Olympics' date, Lhasa and the Dalai Lama,

Panorama viewers had more difficulties in determining the starting month of the Beijing Olympics than viewers of *Wiadomości* (HSD: $p<0.104$). This could be due to the difference in content of the reports. *Wiadomości* did not mention the exact date but said that the Olympics were in six months and showed a time count-down clock with the 08.08.2008 date on it. *Panorama* did not provide this information.

Regarding the capital of Tibet, Lhasa, viewers of *Panorama* also gave the least number of correct answers, especially in comparison to those who saw *Wiadomości* (HSD: $p<0.001$) and *Wydarzenia* (HSD: $p<0.001$). Once again, content was compared. At the beginning of *Wiadomości*, the news reader informed that the events took place in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, after which a map was shown with Lhasa marked on it. Similarly, in *Wydarzenia*, first the reporter mentioned the riots and said where they took place, in the capital of Tibet. Next, a map was shown. Meanwhile, viewers of *Panorama* only once heard the name Lhasa without any explanation what it was.

As far as the Dalai Lama, again viewers of *Wiadomości* showed a high level of detailed knowledge, this time significantly higher than viewers of *Fakty* (HSD: $p<0.018$) and *Wydarzenia* (HSD: $p<0.018$). Even though none of the reports said exactly who he was, those watching *Wiadomości* provided the most correct answers. What differentiated TVP1 from other channels was the showing of archive footage of events from 49 years ago when the Dalai Lama was exiled from Tibet and the anti-Chinese uprising was squashed. We can assume that providing historical background allowed viewers to come to conclusions about the Dalai Lama.

It can be said that the choice of report content can have a significant influence on the viewers' level of detailed knowledge on a subject. As a result of providing thorough explanations (on the capital), or by showing extra visuals (map, time clock) viewers can construct a better image of the reported event. Also valuable is showing of broader, historical background such as archive footage which also increased understanding of the broadcast regarding the most imperative journalist questions – who, what, where, when and why.

Main idea of the broadcast

The same subject of the message can be presented in different ways, depending on the adopted by the broadcaster's point of view. In other words, every report has a direct goal, in connection with the sender's intentions. The goal of a news report can be to inform on an

event or to persuade the viewer to develop a certain opinion about it. In addition to relating the facts, news reports also usually include evaluative content. The vocabulary used (emotional adjectives), context in which events and participants are shown and, most of all, the choice of information presented can have a significant influence on how people view and asses the events. In reports on anti-Chinese demonstration in Tibet journalists took into consideration several issues: presentation of official information by Chinese media, the issue of Beijing Olympics boycott and information of demonstrations supporting the Tibetans all over the world.

Recognizing sender intentions is fundamental in understanding the basic sense of the broadcast. This task shows whether the viewer can assess if the aim of the report was to inform about facts or to shape his opinions (persuasive goal). In the task of identifying the report's main idea, viewers had to state what its goal was in their opinion. They were to choose one of the four options: 1) to draw public attention to Chinese aggression toward Tibet, 2) to draw public attention to Tibetan aggression toward Chinese authorities, 3) to persuade politicians and athletes to boycott the Olympics, 4) to persuade people to organize and take part in anti-Chinese protests supporting the Tibetans.

Definitely the most chosen statement was one, talking about the Chinese aggression against the Tibetan people. , as the main topic of the reports. However, this percentage significantly varied, depending on which channel viewers watched (χ^2 = 30.30; p<0.001). While the average was about 70% of surveyed, in case of those who watched *Fakty* it was 20% lower. Moreover, one third of TVN viewers chose the report's persuasive character, to convince politicians and athletes to boycott the Olympics in Beijing. Regarding viewers of other channels, this option was chosen by roughly less than 10% of people.

News report content analysis allowed us to pin point at least two factors which determined the differences between the viewers opinions as far as the broadcasts' main aims by those who watched *Fakty* and other channels.

Firstly, the choice of report content could be the deciding factor in understanding the broadcast's main idea. It is a known fact that information selection significantly influences viewer opinions. Authors of analysed reports chose different content to present this issue. *Fakty* journalists at the beginning pointed out the issue of Beijing Olympics boycott with regard to the Tibet situation. Additionally, most time was devoted to this issue during the report introduction in the studio. Then, the report itself also included statements by Polish and foreign politicians supporting the boycott. Twice, a very suggestive association was used, comparing the upcoming Olympics with Hitler using the 1936 Berlin Olympics to promote

his regime. In contrast to *Fakty*, the other broadcasters used about one sentence to mention the boycott issue in their reports. This shows the persuasive character of reports by TVN. Not surprisingly, its viewers chose this option, to persuade to boycott, as the main goal of the broadcast. As a result of presented content, viewers supported this option.

Secondly, the difference in report goal can also be explained by the report's sub heading accompanying studio commentary. *Fakty* subheading was persuasive in character and differed from the other channels. The text included not only information on the situation in Tibet but also referred to the possibility of boycotting the Olympics (*Difficult Tibet. Will there be a boycott of Beijing Olympics?*). Therefore, the sub heading appearing at the beginning of the programme turned the viewers' attention to the boycott issue.

Attitudes toward the issues presented

Attitudes are people's inner learned inclinations aired through certain behaviour, especially regarding taking specific action in answer to social expectations. Attitude is an opinion, understood as a collection of subjective intellectual and emotional experiences determining a person's relation to reality. Attitude is a relatively permanent psychological disposition, although it can change over time, generally as a result of obtaining new information. Attitude toward an issue, including the form and content of media announcements, is the resultant of knowledge, opinions, feelings and motives which are usually emotionally tied.

Attitude is the source of news announcement assessment as well as a factor filtering content. It can facilitate or hinder remembering and understanding. As a result of the complexity of processing audiovisual broadcasts, attitude is an imperative factor explaining the level of understanding of news reports. It includes set answers to those parts of the announcement which are fleeting as a result of various interfering factors included in the report but also regarding the conditions of its reception.

In the task measuring attitude toward the reported events from Tibet, those surveyed were asked several questions regarding content. Generally, noted were no significant statistical differences as far as attitudes of viewers. Noted was, however, one very interesting tendency regarding the question – Do you agree with the opinion that Bush's presence during the Beijing Olympics will be similar to the situation from 1936 during the Berlin Olympics when US president Roosevelt sat near Adolf Hitler?($F(3;245) = 1,71$; $p<0,165$). According to those who watched *Wiadomości*, this situation could be similar to the one from 1936. (see Figure 3).
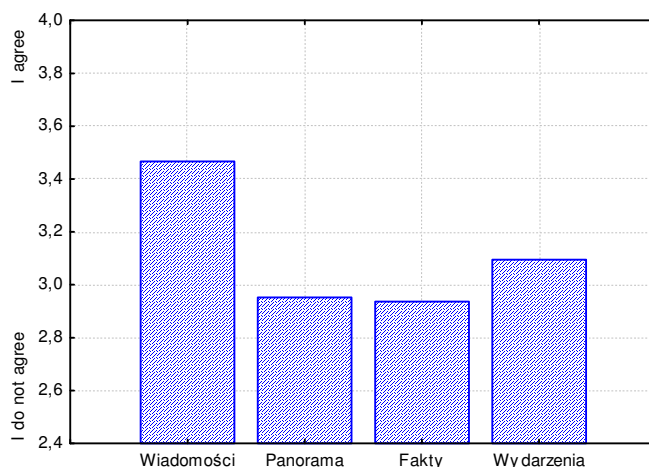
Figure 3. Differences in answers to the question: Do you agree with the opinion that Bush's presence during the Beijing Olympics will be similar to the situation from 1936 during the Berlin Olympics when US president Roosevelt sat near Adolf Hitler?, by news channel.

This example illustrates well the paradox with which we often deal when attempting to comprehend certain reasons for different cognition of various media broadcasts. It was not *Wiadomości* but *Fakty* which used the comparison between the Beijing and Berlin Olympics. TVN quoted American congressman Frank Wolf's commentary, "Bush's presence during the Beijing Olympics will be similar to the situation from 1936 when during the Berlin Olympics president Roosevelt sat near Adolf Hitler" (this statement was not only read but also shown on the screen). Moreover, PiS Senator, Zbigniew Romaszewski said, "If we watch films from 1932 and 1936, they blatantly show Hitler promoting his regime. This is how it was and will be edited, all broadcasts from the Olympics are shown as the regime's great success, a regime that shoots people".

Why is it so then that viewers of *Fakty* did not agree to the same extent with Wolf's and Romaszewski's comments as those who watched *Wiadomości,* which did not include any references to the Berlin Olympics? To answer this question we looked at the images accompanying the reports which, as we know, are more effective than text in stimulating viewer's semantic network and generate stronger associations. *Fakty*, *Wydarzenia* and *Panorama*, have a rather standard and classic formula of news image construction. They included illustrations of city riots from Chinese television, fragments of demonstrations by those supporting the Tibetans and several more or less official commentaries to the situation.

Wiadomości also had these elements but it also included material which reminded people of the martial law period in Poland. There were account witness statements, similar to those from 1981 and a statement by a Tibet refugee in which apparent were the similarities in Poland and Tibet's history. The material also included black and white photos, much alike those from Polish or Soviet II World War newsreels. All these elements stirred up viewers' associations much more than words said by politicians. It is evident that image provoked much stronger reactions than text.

Cognition of cause and effect relations

Viewers of audiovisual broadcasts are not just passive recipients of content. On the contrary, while viewing they behave similarly to when solving problems. They not only decode meaning but also make conclusions based on data provided as well as prior knowledge. This process is known as reasoning, meaning the ability to process information so as to draw valuable conclusions. Viewers aim to explain presented events in the context of mutual causal ties, time and space as well as cause and effect relations. What is more, most often they do it unconsciously.

In order to determine how cause and effect relationships in the presented events were understood by viewers, a task was constructed in which used was information explicitly stated in the news reports and also information not given directly but significant in understanding the issue. People surveyed were to answer three questions regarding causes of presented events: 1) why were Chinese authorities shooting at the Tibetans?, 2) why are the Tibetans protesting against the Chinese?, 3) why are some other government authorities calling for a boycott of the Beijing Olympics? There were four multiple choice answers available ("yes" answers, coded as 1, when viewers agreed with a statement, or "no", coded as 0, when they did not agree with the statement).

From the perspective of image influence on understanding of news content particularly interesting were answers provided regarding reasons for the Olympics boycott appeal. More than 80% said that authorities supported the boycott because they were of the opinion that this way they can stop the escalation of Chinese aggression against the Tibetans. Also, more than 70% were of the opinion that it is the authorities' moral obligation. We also determined the differences in answers given by viewers of different news channels ($F(3;245) = 1.83$; $p<0.072$). The reason for moral obligation of boycotting the Olympics was most often chosen by those who watched *Wydarzenia* and least often by those who watched *Fakty* (see Figure 4).
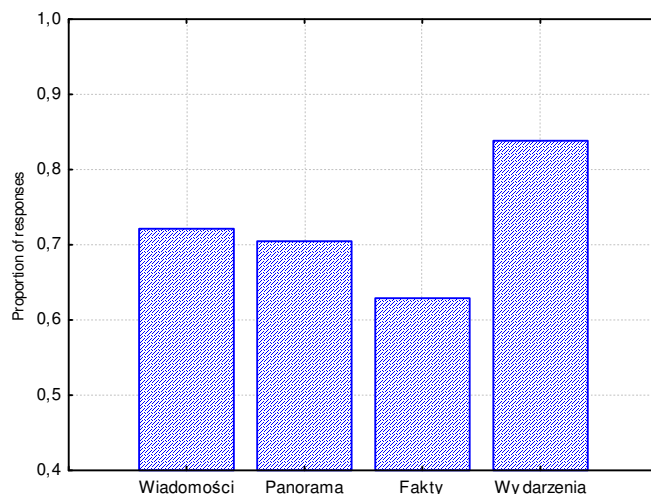
Figure 4. Answers to the question as to why are authorities appealing for an Olympics boycott because they consider it their moral obligation, by news programme

The tendency revealed in Figure 4 is interesting mostly because it was *Fakty*'s report which showed images of Lhasa as well as faces and statements made by politicians while in *Wydarzenia* no authorities were shown. Let's examine the credibility of images offered and comments by politicians. *Fakty* first presented US Secretary of State Sean McCormack's commentary, then a series of various smiling government leaders, including Angela Merkel, at a table. Following, there was a shot of G. W. Bush getting off a helicopter and greeting his people. Then shown was Frank Wolf's statement comparing the Berlin and Beijing Olympics. Finally, presented was PiS Senator Zbigniew Romaszewski's commentary. This is how TVN justified the thesis of moral obligation to boycott.

In contrast to *Fakty*, *Wydarzenia* referred directly to the moral aspect of the boycott but did not show any politicians. The moral obligation to boycott was justified by actor Richard Gere (a converted Buddhist), the Dalai Lama (Tibet's spiritual leader) and Tsering Woeser (Tibetan writer). It appears that more meaningful were statements made by those who are not politicians. It is an old rule of thumb, often used in propaganda, that if you want to convince people that authorities should have a certain moral obligation, it is better to show other celebrities (representatives of culture, religion or show-business). They are a lot more trustworthy than politicians.

Conclusion

Results of research discussed in the article allow us to come to the conclusion that image to a large degree determines the depth and scope of understanding of news content. The differences were found on all analysed levels of cognition convince us how imperative image is in the construction of news reports. It also shows how dangerous it can be when it is treated only as an addition to text or sound. Improperly or randomly chosen images can hinder reception and cognition of content or even lead to incorrect understanding, in result news reports instead of informing can misinform.