

When a Media Entity Humanizes its Identity Politics of Representation in The Filipino Channel's Own Historiography

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Abstract

The study is a critical discourse analysis of the 'auto-historiography' of The Filipino Channel (TFC) in the form of periodic station IDs and 20th anniversary audio-visual presentation. It looks into how TFC constructs a humanized identity of itself as a transnational Filipino, and why maintaining such an identity is necessary for longevity. Using the three-dimensional framework of Norman Fairclough (1995) and taking the suggestion of Greg Philo (2007), I did not only analyze the media texts, but also my interviews with other TFC proponents not seen or heard in the aired materials; how I recorded my auto-ethnographic observation; and the dominant, negotiated, and oppositional comments of viewers online (Hall, 1980). As I problematized politics of representation in media's mediation of itself, the following were revealed: that several voices are muted by the literal exclusion of soundbites that do not conform to the producer's mandate; that overseas Filipinos are essentialized as a race of heroes longing constantly for home, thus affirming their decision to migrate and convincing them to subscribe to TFC for many generations; and that more than empowering transnational Filipinos, TFC uses the power of naming them after itself as TFC: The Filipino Community Worldwide, thereby instilling loyalty that can prevent them from shifting to competition. Nonetheless, with TFC's global presence and interactive platforms, it can serve as a venue for transformative politics, where those it represents can negotiate their identities, offer their own versions of the past, or forge alliances for advocacies that require collective action.

Keywords: transnational media, identity politics, social lives of commodities, OFW

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Investigating the Media Entity

The Filipino Channel, commonly known as TFC, is a product of the global business segment of the Philippine media conglomerate ABS-CBN Corporation. Envisioned by founder Eugenio Lopez, Jr., TFC aims to reach territories with a significant number of overseas Filipinos (ABS-CBN News, 2014, May 3). At present, TFC is available in several countries in North America, Middle East, Europe, Australia, and Asia Pacific via various media platforms such as cable, direct-to-home, internet protocol television, online, and mobile (ABS-CBN Corporate, "Business Segments," n.d.).

It took sometime before scholars became interested in TFC. Vergara seems to be the only one who wrote about the channel in its infancy in 1996. He analyzed it as being "so far removed from the everyday lives of Filipino Americans" (p. 94) but, nonetheless, saw it as important, realizing that "the homeland has everything to do with their everyday life in America" (p. 95).

After a decade, researchers noticed how TFC could become a significant part of the day-to-day life (Paragas (2006) and cultural formation (Oreiro, 2014) of Filipinos outside the Philippines.

Although there were those who saw TFC as: one of grandmothers' preferred pastimes (Kataoka-Yahiro et al, 2004, p. 115); source of Philippine election information on candidates and campaign issues (Paragas, 2006, p. 268); a means to keep oneself connected to the Philippines (Martinez, 2007, p. 69); essential in establishing the Filipino ethnoscape (Lum, 2008, p. 111); and helpful in re-connecting the youth to their homeland (Contreras, 2010, p. 134); there were those who critically saw TFC as media's strategy to rationalize migration and increase profits, thereby framing content to satisfy this objective (Tolentino, 2009, p. 436; Cabalquinto, 2014, p. 52, 63; Brillon, 2015, p. 2215).

Taking off from the critical studies on TFC, this paper attempts to unpack the media entity and its products as commodities, provisionally defined by Appadurai (1986) as "objects of economic value" (p. 3). He proposes that "commodities, like persons, have social lives" whose "exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing, is its socially relevant feature" (p. 13). Appadurai agrees with Simmel (as cited in Appadurai, 1986) that value is "never an inherent property of objects, but is a judgment made about them by the subjects" (p. 3).

Specifically, this essay is a critical discourse analysis of TFC's 'auto-historiography' as narrated via its media products: its periodic station identities (SIDs) produced during milestone years and played throughout the particular year within its 24-hour programming; and its 20th anniversary audio-visual presentation (AVP) aired as a special segment on its popular weekend variety show "ASAP." This study investigates how TFC constructs a humanized identity of itself, and why maintaining such an identity is necessary for longevity.

To answer those questions, the three-dimensional framework of Norman Fairclough

(2001, pp. 129-134) was used, following these steps or stages:

Stage 1: Focus upon a social problem which has a semiotic aspect. Stage 2: Identify obstacles to it being tackled.

Stage 3: Does the social order (network of practices) in a sense ‘need’ the problem?

Stage 4: Identify possible ways past the obstacles

To enhance Fairclough’s framework, Greg Philo (2007) suggested that, in order to overcome the problems of text-based analysis (e.g. weakness in ability to capture the impact of external factors like media practice, and the actual meanings attributed to the texts by various audiences), simultaneous analyses of the processes of production, content, reception and circulation of social meaning must be performed. Thus, taking Philo’s suggestion, I did not only analyze the media texts, particularly TFC’s major SIDs from 1994 to 2014 and its celebratory 20th anniversary AVP, but also the following: my interviews with other TFC proponents not seen or heard in the aired materials; the way I recorded my auto-ethnographic observation; and the viewers’ comments that were posted online after watching the media texts.

Humanizing Media Identity for Longevity

In ABS-CBN’s auto-historiography, it boasts of bringing television to the Philippines and introducing many firsts, e.g. “first color broadcast, first live satellite transmission, first coverage of an international event... in [its] drive to showcase the best of the Filipino” (ABS-CBN Corporate, “Our Story,” n.d., 1:20). The media conglomerate refers to itself as *Kapamilya* (family member); addresses its viewers and customers also as *Kapamilya*; and claims that “the inspiring story of the Filipino is what ABS-CBN is all about” (0:24).

ABS-CBN is among the top three broadcast media companies in the Philippines, along with GMA and TV5. These three have been assuming humanized identities that they themselves constructed: As ABS-CBN calls itself *Kapamilya* to impress that it is a member of the family who treats its viewers the same way (ABS-CBN Corporate, “Vision, Mission & Values,” n.d.), GMA, on the other hand, calls itself *Kapuso* to profess that it is “one in heart with every Filipino” (GMA Careers, “About Us,” n.d.). *Kapuso* seemingly works to counter ABS-CBN’s claim by widening the scope of GMA’s viewers and deepening its relationship with them to extend beyond blood relations. The third player, TV5, calls itself *Kapatid* (brother/sister) most likely to differentiate itself from its forerunners by pronouncing that it is “one with the [current] generation it serves” (TV5, “About Us,” n.d.).

The three have established their global presence by bringing their respective channels—TFC, GMA Pinoy TV, and Kapatid TV5—to Filipino households outside Philippine shores. As they compete locally and globally, they have written their own historiographies in the form of coffee-table books, SIDs, and/or AVPs that harp on their individual achievements, while assuming their parent companies’ respective humanized identities.

The humanized *Kapamilya* identity of ABS-CBN is assumed by its global counterpart TFC which (or ‘who’) is the realization of the company slogan “in the service of the Filipino worldwide.” The slogan and the handle *Kapamilya* is used in promoting TFC’s various media products.

In its periodic SIDs, TFC’s representations of itself have evolved from inanimate objects to a fully human identity. When it launched, TFC portrayed itself as a remote control and a home in “Switch on to the Philippines” (ABS-CBN International, 1994). After five years, it switched to more intangible ideas like “coming home” and “being at home” in “*At Home Ka sa TFC* [You’re Home on TFC]” (ABS-CBN International, 1999). Ten more years after that, in “*Dahil Tayo’y Filipino* [Because We Are Filipino]” (ABS-CBN Global, 2009), it became the voice of overseas Filipinos, championing them as unsung heroes possessing admirable character traits, then smoothly segueing to sharing the limelight with them. Ultimately, just a few years before its 20th anniversary, in “*Tayo ang TFC* [We are TFC]” (ABS-CBN Global, 2011), it assumed a fully human identity while reiterating praiseworthy qualities that the Filipino and TFC jointly possess.

In “*Tayo ang TFC*,” the acronym T.F.C. becomes The Filipino Community Worldwide. TFC names its audiences after itself as everyone in the SID, one after the other, declares... “*Ako ang TFC*; I am TFC; *Kami ang TFC*; We are TFC!”

Appadurai (1986) suggests that we track the exchange of the commodities as it is the circulation, the movement of the commodities, that enlivens them. In the case of TFC, it has been exchanged from a simple remote control to a very sentimental home until it became a very familiar person, who is one’s self. This exchange is what creates value, according to Appadurai and, quoting Simmel (as cited in Appadurai, 1986), he proposes that “economic value...is generated by this sort of exchange of sacrifices” (p. 4), wherein “one’s desire for an object is fulfilled by the sacrifice of some other object” (p.3). For TFC, its paying subscribers have found TFC as worth the hard-earned money they make abroad. By enlivening or humanizing TFC, its subscribers can continue to justify the money they spend on maintaining their subscription, somehow rationalizing that “a *Kapamilya* will not charge them an arm and a leg” or that “it is okay to pay; anyway, I am giving my money to a *Kapamilya*” (who, in the same breath, can refer to a *Kababayan* or compatriot in the home country to whom giving back is expected and is considered noble).

Politics of Representation, Diversion, and Conversion in Media’s Mediation of Itself

Likewise, in its the 20th anniversary AVP, TFC humanizes itself as it narrates its history through the human experiences of high-ranking company officials and pioneer employees, who were particularly selected to represent the media company and its products.

The “TFC Retro AVP” (ABS-CBN International, N.A., 2014), presents company officials not just as men and women of ABS-CBN “in the service the Filipino

worldwide” but as common Filipinos, who, like their audiences, dream, survive life abroad, and “will bloom even in the desert” as the Chief Executive Officer Eugenio Lopez III said (7:46).

Appadurai (1986) argues that “what creates a link between exchange and value is politics” (p. 3). As TFC represents itself as home, its customers are reminded of their homesickness, which prompts them to purchase not just TFC but anything that reminds them of the Philippines i.e. all ‘home-related’ products that TFC can offer. Additionally, as TFC represents itself as a *Kapamilya*, it enjoins all overseas Filipinos who have realized their dreams of a better life for their families in the Philippines, to share their good fortune via TFC-branded remittance and cargo services. The *Kapamilya* representation goes further to touch the hearts of Filipinos as TFC gives them blow-by-blow reports of the devastation caused by calamities in places as familiar as their own hometowns. This prompts them to course their donations through ABS-CBN Foundation as advertised on TFC.

As I followed the movement of the exported product that is TFC, I was able to trace the politics of diversion and conversion, two of the many ways commodities flow. Such flow of commodities, says Appadurai (1986), “is a shifting compromise between socially regulated paths and competitively inspired diversions” (p. 17). In the case of TFC, diversion can be seen in two forms: diverting the path of a homegrown product from the Philippines to other countries to be sold for a higher price in the form of subscription fees; and diverting the attention of migrant Filipinos from the risks of migration (not to mention lack of government support in their home country and protection in their host country) to news and entertainment from back home that, in the past, were hard to come by.

Conversion happens when TFC is converted into the various currencies that affluent expatriate Filipinos can already afford to spend. In turn, TFC converts those monies into concerts, movies, studio tours, and face-to-face encounters with their favorite celebrities. Those experiences are further exchanged for increased patronage of merchandise as souvenirs, which serve as reminders not just of the event they attended but of the higher status they now enjoy.

The free-TV viewers back in the Philippines are now paying subscribers abroad.

As Igor Kopytoff (1986) opines, TFC as a commodity can move in and out of the commodity state. TFC’s historiography shows how it moved from the United States to the Middle East where the bigger market is. But in doing so, it almost moved out of the commodity state in that area because of the lower paying capacity of the Filipino contract workers there. To maintain its commodity state, TFC had to come up with a communal paying scheme in order to fit the requirements of commodity candidacy that Appadurai (1986) refers to as “the standards and criteria (symbolic, classificatory, and moral) that define the exchangeability of things in any particular social and historical context” (p. 14).

As TFC explored other territories with high concentration of Filipinos, the advent of

digital technology posed as a bigger challenge for TFC in maintaining the commodity phase of its career. To protect its status, TFC instituted its anti-piracy campaign to restrict access, barring unauthorized and therefore unpaid consumption of TFC content.

What TFC however could not easily overcome was the 2011 tsunami in Japan which forced the office to temporarily cease collection of subscription fees. Despite its humanized identity as a *Kapamilya*, it has not yet reached the state of pricelessness to make paying for the subscription a sensible exchange of sacrifice during that time. As Appadurai (1986) quips, “Pricelessness is a luxury few commodities can afford” (p. 19).

At best, what TFC could do to try to reach the pricelessness state is to represent overseas Filipinos as modern-day heroes, drivers of the Philippine economy. By assuming the humanized “*Tayo ang TFC*” identity, it claims to journey with the Filipino wherever s/he chooses to be, thus riding with the fame and socio-political life that s/he leads. For as long as the diaspora continues, TFC remains in the commodity state.

Silencing Some Humans

In the interviews I conducted with the other TFC proponents who were not selected to give their testimonies for the “TFC Retro AVP,” what surfaced were the intimate details in TFC’s historiography that were omitted.

TFC’s history could be told differently if the narratives of the people who left the company would be taken into account. Unfortunately, the inclusion or exclusion of their voices in the “TFC Retro AVP” is dependent on the relationship they have maintained or severed with top management.

Former Chief Marketing Officer Carmencita Orlina’s observations did not make it to the “TFC Retro AVP.” She was not one of those sought to give her spiel. In my interview with her she said, “One of the challenges was the culture that pervades in a Filipino-owned company with a family controlling it. The showbiz environment made things worse because transparency and accountability were not in the company’s vocabulary” (personal communication, December 11, 2015).

Another excluded narrative was from former Advertising Communications Head Elizabeth Siojo, who stated, “It was difficult to address so many product offerings because there was no branding mindset yet. Marketing Communications was struggling to catch up with the demands of Sales” (personal communication, December 11, 2015).

The difficulty Siojo mentioned is shared by other employees but the latter’s versions of their histories with TFC gloss over the injustices they have experienced, including working long hours under minimal salary; more work as a reward for beating the deadline or doing the impossible; health risks due to frigid work areas more conducive for machines than for human workers; or the inequality in treatment

wherein celebrities and the leadership team are regarded as more important and therefore deserve more concessions.

Former production assistants recalled their experience of TFC rather fondly, despite the hardships: “We waited after [the stars'] tapings and live shows but, it turned out, they left exiting the backdoor,” said Joemalyn Serafica (personal communication, December 19, 2014). “Working late [came with] having fun, eating at the cafeteria, and squeezing ourselves in one table together with the bosses,” said Violeta Teodosio (personal communication, December 20, 2014).

There were those who mustered just enough courage to disclose some hidden truths in TFC’s history while requesting to remain anonymous, cognizant of the risks that their revelation would pose to their employment and/or immigration status. Two executives who specifically requested not to be named said:

Politics was FARTHEST from my mind and all I wanted was to help stage successful events at that time and for my team to be a hardworking, efficient support team to internal clients. But it was a time of great change - a sea change in the organization and its direction. So, there was an air of uncertainty, instability and insecurity (personal communication, January 16, 2015).

Office politics started to creep in when we expanded and more people are hired from the outside. I have managed to survive a couple of coup[s] d'etat launched by people who would like to push me out of the company. I don't know how I managed to hang on and stay, while those people who planned and orchestrated it have are not anymore connected with the company. One of them said before he left that I managed to hang on because I can sway like the bamboo or dance to the new music that the company propagates at any point in time. Probably.... probably. (personal communication, January 12, 2015).

On the other side of the globe, one of the staff has her own perspective of the same situation, “I have experienced a series of reorganizations. The challenge was to keep up with the expectations of different leaders... But the greatest challenge is to always be objective and set aside my personal interests” (personal communication, December 11, 2015).

Even if some of the employees had only pleasant memories to narrate about TFC, they were not given the chance to. On the other hand, even if the chosen employees were given the chance to be included in the AVP, they did not have enough time to say everything or their footage had to be cut for practical reasons. However, the selection of the spokespersons to either match the script or to do whatever is convenient, and the deliberate or seemingly inadvertent exclusion of soundbites, largely depend on the producers’ mandate. If the informants and the information they provide do not conform to such mandate, they and theirs will have to be silenced.

Silencing the Self

Having been part of the creation of TFC, I was one of those selected to appear in the “TFC Retro AVP.” The few seconds of hugging the limelight did not help me critically write the historiography of the company that I worked for, for almost two decades. I initially retold TFC’s past with lack of interrogation. I just echoed the ideologies of the owners. My deep immersion into the complexities of showbusiness, both glamorous and scandalous, probably caused my ‘selective mutism,’ in a figurative sense. I silenced my own experiences of injustice.

In “TFC Retro AVP,” I was quoted for saying, “*Masaya kaming nagtatrabaho nang magkakasama at alam naming makabuluhan iyong ginagawa namin.* [We were happy working together and we knew then that what we were doing was meaningful.]” (6:56)

I did not mention that I had to set aside my work as a marketing services manager to serve as *alalay* (assistant/servant) or *yaya* (nanny) to the stars. I forgot about the unspoken rule that travelling to other territories was not regarded as a tool of the trade in order to understand the various markets but a privilege reserved for those who deserve it, based on the financier’s standards. I missed saying that despite the company’s claim of valuing its employees, top management was unprepared to present me with a clear succession plan, when my superior left to join the competitor. I did not realize that I was not exactly rewarded for my performance but for my length of stay that tells of how I have been enduring showbiz politics, until I did my critical analysis.

Although I did remember saying some things during the shoot that I knew were edited out, I let those pass. I asked the segment producer for a copy of the AVP but only to check how I looked, how I sounded, and make an overall evaluation of the material. After viewing the final cut, I might have expressed some of my thoughts and feelings about it, but only to those I felt safe with. I did not direct my complaints or inquiries to the scriptwriter or director as to why it lacked so many events, especially those that transpired in the Philippines, that I thought were as, if not more, significant, or why the people in the U.S. office had more exposure than other offices. I held back my comments and did not let those reach top management. At that time, I did not want to ruffle anyone’s feathers again, so to speak.

Some Humans Choose to Speak

Some TFC SIDs are uploaded to YouTube for viewers around the world to watch. They are used as marketing materials to promote TFC to transnational Filipinos who are in various online platforms. Some of the online viewers took time out to comment. I used Hall’s (1980 in Durham & Kellner, 2012) encoding-decoding theory, to analyze the viewers’ decoding of the messages that are encoded and conveyed by TFC through its SIDs.

While there are those who accept TFC’s messages hook, line, and sinker, echoing the

lines from the SIDs, it is important to note that, despite TFC's attempt to name its audiences after itself and represent itself as a *Kapamilya*, there are those who viewed the messages with heightened awareness that TFC is still a business; that overseas Filipinos fuel the business; and that separating from one's family and working abroad is somehow encouraged to ensure TFC sustains its business.

One of the oppositional comments states:

Line 212: *inuuto lang tau mga ofw sa kantang ito. Pino promote lalo ang patuloy ng pag ka watak2 ng pamilyang Filipino. Dapat hikayatin nila tau mga ofw dalhin ang galing at talino sa bansa natin. siguro kung mag sama2 tau mas maginhawa pa tau sa ba[n]sang pinagsilbihan natin. Sabagay kung wala ng OFW hindi na kikita ang TFC nila* [We are being fooled by this song. It promotes the fragmentation of the Filipino family. They should instead encourage us to use our skills and knowledge in our country. Maybe, if we would come together, our country would be more prosperous than the ones we serve. But on hindsight, without OFWs, TFC will not sell] (ABS-CBN News, 2014, April 27).

Also, there are also those who saw both sides: TFC's illusory proclamations and its potential to promote patriotism, to encourage patronage of local products, and to motivate Filipinos abroad to give back.

Below is one of the negotiated readings:

Babeudoo: for the naysayers of this video, while it's true na *wala sa lahi ang pagiging magaling* [greatness is not determined by race] and pinoy pride might be an illusion, from someone who's living abroad nothing is perfect guys we just have to be the best we can be. Patriotic videos like these help instill love for our country and make us want to spend our dollars there than anywhere else and do more to help our people. It doesn't help to remember that the Filipino is his own worst enemy so let's just not go there. (ABS-CBN News, 2014, April 27).

From an Identity of Commodity to Utility Can Transnational Filipinos Utilize Transnational Media for Transformative Politics?

As I problematized politics of representation in media's mediation of itself, the following were revealed: that several voices are silenced by the literal exclusion of their soundbites that do not conform to the producer's mandate; that overseas Filipinos are essentialized as a race of heroes longing constantly for home, thus affirming their decision to migrate and convincing them to subscribe to TFC for many generations; and that more than empowering transnational Filipinos, TFC uses the power of naming them after itself, thereby instilling loyalty that can prevent them from shifting to competition, and sustaining its state of commodity as it remains to be worthy of the exchange of sacrifice for several years.

TFC is a business that needs to remain in its commodity state. It has to continue collecting subscription and other fees in order to continue its operations. For as long as its subscribers see the value of TFC as commensurate to their sacrifice, they will keep exchanging that sacrifice with access to their *Global Kapamilya* via IPTV, cable,

satellite, mobile, and web. With the willing participation of transnational Filipinos in the exchange, TFC will most likely survive for two more decades or longer than it already has.

However, despite its obvious capitalist motivations to normalize migration and generate profits, the transnational media entity does possess the power to serve as a conduit for political action. With TFC's global presence and interactive media platforms, it poses as a fertile ground for transformative politics. TFC can potentially move from commodity to utility if and when transnational Filipinos would utilize it to gain agency.

The so-called second-generation Filipino youth, for instance, or those who were born and raised in other countries, can utilize TFC to initiate political or socio-cultural movements; TFC sees them anyway as an important market and seriously needs them for longevity. In its more youthful version of "*Galing ng Filipino*" (ABS-CBN Entertainment, 2015), TFC shifts the applause from the stereotypical overseas workers and migrants to the young Filipino global achievers. The shift shows that TFC needs fresh blood to enliven itself. TFC foresees that it will eventually 'die' together with its ageing customers if the *Kapamilya* spirit is not passed onto the next of kin. In TFC's website, ABS-CBN Global Chief Operating Officer Rafael Lopez professes that TFC, "is a purveyor of Filipino culture and values to younger generations, and through it [they] aim to promote a better understanding and appreciation of Filipino identity and pride" (The Filipino Channel, "About TFC," n.d.).

As TFC offers its humanized *Global Kapamilya* identity to them, the transnational Filipino youth can gain agency by utilizing TFC's humanized identity to their advantage. The avenues presented to them such as TFCU can serve as a platform for their advocacies. According TFC Global Marketing Head Pamela Castillo, TFCU is an outreach program meant to "connect Filipino American students to organize Filipino unity and pride on campus and beyond" (para. 5) The "U" stands for "University" because "it is when second generation Filipino Americans go to university," according to TFCU Project Head Troy Espera, "that they actively want to know more about their being Filipino" (para. 4). One of the events organized by TFC is called #TFCUTalks. TFCU core member Diana Vergara describes it as "like TED Talks. It's informational and inspirational. [They] talk about innovation, technology, and different things in the industry."

A transnational media entity such as TFC humanizes its identity to sustain its state of commodity but, like any identity that is dynamic and not static, plural and not singular, TFC can evolve or assume other identities. The transnational youth can see TFC as a channel for several opportunities such as for reconstructing and negotiating their identities, for offering other versions of their pre-colonial past, and forging strong alliances among themselves or with other nations for the Philippines' political, social, and/or economic transformation.

What is probably left in question is if they are willing and ready to imagine and

assume the identity of a Filipino culture bearer, interested in indigenous historiography and actively contributing to nation-building.

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This paper is inspired by unpublished studies conducted by the researcher on the subject. The researcher deemed it necessary to gather more data and analyze her own works with greater criticality after peer review and self evaluation. There are some information re-provided herein that are intentionally used for a different purpose.

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