



COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND MEDIA NEWS

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The international research project Global Media Generations (GMG) studied which media events were recalled by three different age cohorts in eight different countries. In this article, Ruth Teer-Tomaselli discusses what the various cohorts in different countries remembered, and why and how these events were remembered, emphasizing the relevance of collective memory.

The *Global Media Generations* (GMG) project, undertaken by a self-defined international study group, set out to discover, through a comparative methodology, what media events were recalled by three different age cohorts over eight different countries (Australia, Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, India, Japan, Mexico, South Africa and the United States of America). The periods from which the cohorts were chosen were the Radio Generation (born between 1924 and 1929, their formative years being between 1935 and 1946); the 'black and white' television generation (born between 1954 and 1959, formative years 1965-1969); and the 'Internet Generation' (born between 1979 and 1984, formative years 1989-1999). These were taken as generalised categories, although in South Africa and India television was introduced much later than in other countries. ^[i]

This article ^[ii] discusses examples of *what* the various cohorts in different countries remembered, and attempts to understand *why* and *how* these events were remembered. The analysis is concerned with collective memory, the theorisation of which gives greater emphasis to the social context than to autobiographical, personal memory.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY ^[iii]

The human memory is constantly bombarded with images and information. Based on the sheer magnitude of processing and storage that takes place, it is reasonable to infer that the procedure involves something more complex than isolated bio-cognitive functions. There is a social aspect to memory processing. Today, cognitive psychologists acknowledge

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that “the memories of people in different cultures will vary because their mental maps are different” (Connerton, 1989: 28). These mental maps are constructed through human experience that is inherently situational and communal. No matter how personal, everything we remember exists in relationship to ideas, values or feelings others process. Any individual memory is dependent on collectively constructed words, language, images, people and locations. The scripts of our memories are written and revised based on external sources, often of a mediated kind.

The personal was situated within the collective for the first time by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1950, 1980; Coser, 1982), who argued that individuals acquire, localize and recall their memories only through membership to social groups (Connerton, 1989). Indeed, practical experience demonstrates that the bulk of our memories rush in when prompted by questions or comments made by friends, family, colleagues or others around us. In Halbwachs’s theoretical construction, individual memory is entirely dependent on the collective.

Psychology has made inroads into connecting an individual’s memories to his or her context, building upon Halbwachs’s assertion that the individual and collective are not two separate elements, but rather “two points of view from which society can simultaneously consider the same objects” (Coser, 1992: 175).

All collective memories are partial –and hide as much as they reveal. No one memory brings forth everything that is known about a particular event, person or issue. Nor does a single memory depend on a single source: rather, it is an amalgam of several sources, often confused and usually inter-related.

From a methodological point of view, this is of primary importance, since it is impossible to say with any certainty that a particular event was remembered with reference to a particular mediated experience. Memories of the Vietnam War or the first walk on the moon are mosaics of contemporary news programs and print newspapers, as well as subsequent narrative films, historical retrospectives and discussions among friends, colleagues and family. Further, one set of events ‘triggers’ half-baked memories of other seemingly unrelated events. In this way, memory finds parallels between the socio-political and private lives of different interpretative communities, and utilizes them in ways that satisfy the needs of particular groups.

One of the underlying assumptions in the GMG project was that, given a common list of 'prompted' events chosen from a particular timeframe across the international arena, different country-specific groups would remember different topographies of situations, happenings and people.

Incidents held to be critical in the life of a nation are what Levi-Strauss (1966) referred to as 'hot moments', historical conjunctures through which a nation or a cultural group takes stock of its own significance. When employed discursively, the term 'critical incidents' refers to those moments through which people air, challenge and negotiate their own standards of action. In this view, collective memories pivot on discussions of some kind of critical incident.

Barbara Zelizer (1992) explored the collective memory of American journalists in the events surrounding the death of President John Kennedy in 1963, which, although outside the demarcated time periods studied in the GMG project, nevertheless evoked spontaneous memories among respondents in a number of country studies. Zelizer holds that the Kennedy assassination was a 'critical incident' in the American psyche largely because of the mediated nature of recording and commemoration. For an entire generation, it evokes memories of specific iconic images, etched in the collective consciousness in terms of their contemporary distribution but also by frequent reiteration in the four decades since then: "these moments –captured by the media in various forms– have been replayed as marketers of the nation's collective memory each time the story of Kennedy's death is counted" (Zelizer 1992: 24).

NEWSWORTHINESS AND MEDIA RECOLLECTION

In a seminal article, John Galtung and Mari Ruge (1973) identified twelve common factors affecting the selection of news items. Five of these factors also play a major part in the memorability of news items, both in the period immediately after the events and the months or years afterwards: their *size* and *impact*; their *negativity* as well as their *on-going or continuous nature*; those items which deal with *elite personages and countries*; and most crucially, *proximity* -geographic, and more particularly cultural.

In this article I will use these categories as the organizing principles around which specific media events are remembered by specific generations in order to tease out some of the dynamics of what constitutes significant 'markers' for each generation.

SIZE, CONTINUITY AND NEGATIVITY AS MARKERS OF IMPACT

The bigger an event, the more likely it will be reported, and the more prominence it will be given (Galtung and Ruge, 1973). The most widely and intensely remembered event across all the groups in the first cohorts were the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and the dropping of the atom bombs on Japanese cities, heralding the end of the Second World War in the Pacific. Only the German and Czech groups claimed low or subsequent knowledge of these events, which can be explained in terms of the strict censorship of news in those countries during the war.

The continuity of a running story also contributes to both its newsworthiness and the likelihood of it being remembered. Many of the prompted events used in this research were not specific one-off happenings but processes –drawn out over a period of time, and reported and reflected upon in the media as sagas. The Vietnam War, although remembered as a series of specific, ironic happenings and images, played out over a period of years.

The fall of Singapore from allied into Japanese control took just days to effect, but the results unfolded for months after that. Respondents in South Africa identified with the defeated British and Australian troops through their shared membership of the Commonwealth, speaking in detail about the events leading up to the capitulation and the repatriation of women and children evacuated in the face of occupation. Every 'story' has a prequel and a sequel, and in recalling it, these 'peripheral' matters often appear to be more personal, more significant, and therefore more memorable.

Most of the events recalled did not refer to single news items but were on-going stories, frequently taking many months to come to fruition. An example was the O. J. Simpson Trial, regarded as a 'saga', and as compulsive "as a soap opera" (South Africa, cohort 3).

The more negative the consequences of the event, the more probable it will become a news item. Negative news fits the frequency criterion better. In the choice of events and processes reported, there is a basic asymmetry between the positive, which is difficult and takes time to come to fruition (achievement is a long-term process), and the negative, which is much easier and takes less time.

Positive news is reported when an event culminates or something is

inaugurated. Negative news is more easily consensual and unambiguous: it is easier to agree about what is negative than what is positive. Positive news is more clearly defined by ideological factors. Negative news tends to be more unexpected, or less predictable: negative events have the 'advantage' of rarity, presupposing a society in which progress is regarded as the norm, while changes for the better are regarded as 'trivial' and therefore under-reported.

Some theorists have argued that news is more consonant with at least some of the dominant pre-images and expectations of our time. This presupposes a relatively high level of social anxiety that provides a matrix in which negative news are more easily embedded than positive news: a contentious argument, that can be directly argued against in the South African situation, in which the level of social insecurity is consciously fought against by the presentation of positive news.

CONTEMPORARY AND SUBSEQUENT MEMORY

Newsworthy events are broadcast and printed not only when they happen. They are also recycled in the media, and hence in the public imagination, for years afterwards. The transcripts of the various GMG focus groups showed that it is not always possible to distinguish between contemporary memory and subsequent reconstructions of particular events. In some cases, knowledge of particular events only came about months or even years after the original happening. This 'coming into memory' is related to a number of other issues, notably discussions with friends and family and living in a country which is emerging from political or socio-cultural isolation (for example, the US, Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia during the period of the first cohort and South Africa in the period of the second cohort). Frequently, however, it is simply a matter of respondents growing up and being more aware of the socio-political facts around them. The Prague Spring, remembered with great clarity by the Central European groups, was totally unrecalled by groups in countries further away.

The reiteration and circulation of events long afterwards, often in circumstances very different from the original context, is a primary way in which memories are evoked or re-invented.

ELITE PERSONS, ELITE NATIONS

The category of 'elite persons' - people who attract the most public and media attention- as a criterion of newsworthiness also is borrowed from

Galtung and Ruge (1973). It is an established pattern in news bulletins to solicit their opinions on a wide variety of affairs, often not even linked to their area of expertise. This relates to Galtung and Ruge's category of personification. Actions seen as associated with particular individuals are more likely to be reported than occurrences with a more generalized or impersonal agency. More crucially for the question of memory, personification is the outcome of cultural idealism, which is in keeping with the myth that every person's progress is the outcome of an act of free will. Structural factors are minimized, while persons as instruments of their own or other people's destiny is emphasized. Personification in news reporting fulfils the need for positive or negative identification, with famous people serving as its objects through a combination of projection and empathy. It also fulfils the parameters of the frequency factor, constantly recycled through reportage, speculation and endless gossip.

In all cohorts, there are examples of historical events and processes associated with specific people rather than seen as the unfolding of socio-political developments. 'Watergate' was remembered in terms of 'Tricky Dicky', the moniker given to then-President Nixon; the Palestine Liberation Organization is personified by Yasser Arafat; the end of Apartheid, by the release of Nelson Mandela.

Frequently, these memories coalesce around a specific traumatic event in the life of the person. Perhaps the most famous 'media memory' event of all times is the assassination and funeral of John Kennedy (Dayan and Katz 1994; Zelizer 1992). For the German cohort, memories of the Second World War were associated with the attempted assassination of Hitler. All the youngest cohorts, regardless of country, recalled Mother Theresa and Princess Diana of Wales as much for their deaths as for their lives.

The ubiquitous nature of elite persons is also true of elite nations: those with the strongest economies and greatest ability to influence the security, trade and cultural agendas of other countries. In media terms, an elite nation can be classified as one that generates large amounts of media productions accessible to large numbers of people beyond their borders.

Tracking the export trends of 'cultural goods' (radio, television, cinema, photography, printed matter, literature, music and the visual arts), UNESCO (1995: 27) calculated that 68 percent of the world share emanated from the 'developed' countries (which represent 23 percent of the world's population), while 32 percent originated from the developing countries, representing 77 percent of the population.

While it is true that globalizing cultural processes are not entirely dominated by the US or even by the 'West' or the 'North', the so-called

developed countries remain increasingly hegemonic in the spread of cultural artefacts, media and mediated personalities (and English is increasingly becoming the language of global cultural currency).

Elite persons who emanate from elite nations therefore 'score' twice as highly in terms of the likelihood of being remembered. Most of the iconic personalities recalled by respondents from countries other than their own originated in 'developed countries'. Examples of such global personification can be found in the memories associated with O.J. Simpson, Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, Princess Diana and Mother Theresa. The level of globalization becomes more apparent as we progress through the various age cohorts.

PROXIMITY

The most important influence on what is remembered is that of cultural proximity. Galtung and Ruge (1973) note that ethnocentrism is evident in all news broadcasts, with particular attention being paid to the familiar. This is true too of media memories, where every country study, regardless of cohort, reported that the best-remembered and most significant media events were those that occurred within the country of residence.

The first German cohort spontaneously talked about the attempted assassination of Hitler by Graf Stauffenberg and his group in 1944, the only cohort to remark this historical event. Conversely, the Indian cohort recalled nothing of happenings in Europe during the Second World War.

Events in far-away places are recalled more easily when they exhibit a distinct sense of local relevance, an observation backed up by Galtung and Ruge's (1973) remarks that a foreign event is more likely to be reported when it is seen to have relevant implications for a domestic audience. Thus, events were recalled outside the immediate national area frequently in terms of factors associated with the audience's own country.

Edward VIII was remembered by South African respondents not for abdicating from the British throne, but for his previous tour of South Africa (cohort 1). The middle South African cohort was unaware of world-changing events in Eastern Europe except for a few decontextualised details recalled only in terms of their own experiences: "I remember my aunt coming in to say that the Russian have invaded Hungary and this might be a Third World War. Next morning, my cousins and I went to see if there were tanks in the streets pf Johannesburg" (cohort 2). This example also illustrates the importance of families and the life-world memories of respondents.

'Being there' was always an important prompt to remembering, and cuts across the distinction of mediated and life-world memories. The only South African respondent familiar with the Tiananmen Square episode in China was travelling through Hong Kong with her parents at the time.

CLOSED AND OPEN SOCIETIES

Ethnocentrism is particularly apparent in 'closed' societies, a situation that can arise from purposeful isolation, forced by the state, or a cultural exclusiveness and introversion imposed from within society itself. At its most extreme, closed societies enforce strict censorship in terms of what may not be heard or seen, and ideologically - in terms of the prevailing ethos of what is 'permissible'.

The first German and Austrian cohorts are examples of closed societies. Newspapers published official news sanctioned by the state, while it was forbidden to modify radios in order to receive short-wave broadcasts from foreign countries. Nevertheless, families of some of the German respondents did tune into these clandestine news bulletins. Ironically, a similar situation was described by some South African respondents who recalled their fathers listening into secret broadcasts of the underground pro-Nazi sympathisers in a country committed to the Allied cause.

South Africa in the mid-60s and 70s could also be regarded as a closed society, the result of political insularity from within, and the political and cultural boycott of anti-apartheid movements from outside. The second South African cohort was singularly unaware of international events at the time of their happening, and only became interested in world affairs much later in life. "To have been in Durban in the early seventies, and to be white was really to be middle class and to be utterly insulated from everything" opined one, while another concurred "The thing in Stilfontein during that time, because it was a mining town, there was an insularity."

PROPAGANDA

Tightly related to the issue of closed societies is that of propaganda. Japanese respondents recalled that during the Second World War there was no officially sanctioned news from Europe; the only news on the radio concerned the War of Japan, and even then, "it was only that we were winning" (cohort 1).

While propagandistic media frequently are implicit in the everyday experiences of a nation, and therefore appear to be concealed, or at least not appreciated as propaganda at the time, there are occasions when it is obvious even to those to whom it is directed. In the South African second cohort, discussion ranged around a 5' minutes propaganda slot after the radio news each morning. "I do remember listening to it, and I do remember my father listening to it at the same time, and getting extremely angry with it. I remember wondering why he was so angry, but clearly I didn't understand it". This prompted a second respondent to note that "Personally it was the huge revulsion to what was called 'current affairs' which when it come on, I would switch off the radio... because we know it was the government trying to justify the unjustifiable".

FAMILY

The previous mention of the father's reaction to the propagandistic broadcasts and the son's reflection on that brings to the fore the crucial role of the family in response to the media held by youth across all countries and all cohorts. The interaction of the triad of media, memory and historical events operated on at least three levels: children and young people tended to consume the news media favoured by their parents; parents acted as 'gatekeepers' or censors, controlling the programming they thought suitable for their children; and finally, the 'meanings' or value systems through which children made sense of the news events.

Beginning with the oldest cohort, many respondents recall not only listening to the news on the radio, but also the social interaction that accompanied them. A South African respondent claims not to have heard of the abdication of Edward VIII from the media, but rather from his father.

Children watched what the family watched, and took their cue from parents. When asked about the Iraq war of 1990, a Czech respondent replied, "all I can remember is Saddam Hussein, since my parents were speaking about it" (cohort 3). An Austrian respondent echoed a similar sentiment: "I still can remember when the United States took the offensive against Iraq (in 1990). Because we had watched that all together at home and my brother thought that now the Third World War would start" (cohort 3).

There is repeated evidence of the gate-keeping role played by the family in terms of access to what was watched or heard. This appears to have happened more in the earlier cohorts. The first German cohort reported that with regard to political contexts, parents choose to act as gatekeepers

in order to protect their children from conflicting political developments and shield them from any 'ambiguous news', knowledge which might be viewed as 'comparative' outside the household.

The final aspect is the way in which parent's reactions to events shaped the 'meaning' of what was happening. News items were discussed within the family, and the memory of the events was inextricably bound with family responses. Within the South African cohort that experienced the first fully democratic elections of 1994, youth respondents repeatedly referred to the reactions of their parents. The fatalistic sentiments of "My parents thought it would be the end of South Africa and everything would be destroyed" contrasted with more celebratory positions: "I remember my parents and neighbours came over and sat for close to three hours in front of the television, having tea and talking about how they were going to vote. At first I didn't understand how important that voters' day was"; "My parents were also excited when they were watching the news in the morning and [saw] all these people, especially in the rural areas. They were standing in long, long, lines, but they were also happy" (cohort 3).

Parents acted not only as gatekeepers in the sense of being censors, but more importantly, by instilling a sense of what was acceptable at an ideological level. In South Africa, despite the Afrikaans heritage of particular families, parents infused a sense that "the Afrikaans papers at that time were political or party organs". Despite the fact that the extended family would have been reading these newspapers, the respondent was able to articulate that it "was clear that the stance taken by the Afrikaans papers" were not 'ours'" (cohort 2).

LIFE-WORLDS

The concept of life-worlds refers to the everyday world as experienced by ordinary men and women. The paradigm draws on the tradition of phenomenological sociology pioneered by Alfred Schultz (1972, 1974), for whom the life-world is the paramount reality and the main object of enquiry. From a phenomenological perspective, the social world is a world of meaning, and meanings do not have an independent existence, a reality of their own somehow separate from social actors. They are not imposed by an external society that constrains members to act in certain ways; rather, they are constructed and reconstructed by actors in the course of social interaction.

Lived experience does not occur in a vacuum—it is connected to our past and our present social context. Memory is the capsule of the past and the major determinant of the future. Specific events are recalled not only in

terms of their mediated nature through radio, print or television, but also in terms of real-life recollections of experiences that happened at the same time.

In South Africa, the centenary of the Great Trek in 1938 sparked off numerous personal recollections. One respondent recalled the re-enactors of the Trek taking the ceremonial ox wagons far up into the north of the country, the culmination of months of festivities: “all the way up they had celebrations”. Another respondent recalled that on the day of the final climax, her youngest sister was born, and the ward nurses at the hospital dressed the baby up in commemorative clothing (cohort 3).

The OPEC oil crisis was meaningful to Japanese respondents because it resulted in the soaring price of gas, and strangely, the lack of bathroom tissue in stores. The Czech group remembered the reunification of Germany through the exodus of East German residents through Czech territory (Czech cohort 3).

TRIGGERS

‘Triggers’ refer to those stimuli which recall particular memories. The more momentous a story or event is in the history of a country, the more likely to be included in the collective memory of its people. However, even large stories require a ‘trigger’ to set off the memory process. While most of the details of a particular event or set of circumstances are lost to memory, ironically, it is often the small things that stay embedded in the recollections, while the main plot of the story is forgotten. In part, this can be explained by the concept of relevance and proximity: aspects of direct relevance to the individual remain in the mind longer, while those parts of the narrative, albeit the more important ones from a systemic point of view, are either forgotten, or more likely, never grasped in the first place.

The Vietnam War remains one of the most significant events to have taken place in the twentieth century, uniting the fates, as it did, of the ‘west’ and the ‘orient’, and challenging for the first time the might of the industrial world’s heartland. Yet, for many second cohort respondents outside the United States, the ebb and flow of the war was a blur: they recalled isolated incidents, high in iconic value, but low in issue-driven strategic terms.

South African respondents remembered very little of what actually happened in Vietnam, and were hazy about the geography and chronology of the war, claiming they only learnt of the details later. However, they remembered seeing a video of the Kent State University slaying, an action

peripheral to the actual war, since it took place during a university protest march on American soil. This was echoed in Australian cohort, who recalled the same image. It can be speculated that these two cohorts recalled this protest because it had greater consonance with them at the time –most of the cohorts themselves were at university, and shared a sympathy with the Kent State protesters.

On the other hand, among South African respondents, talk of Vietnam triggered discussion of the local border war into Angolan territory, and here the connection is stronger, since many of them were either conscripts, threatened with conscription, or in the case of the women, had boyfriends or brothers who were conscripts.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IMAGES

Images come together in meaningful ways, lending unity, temporal and spatial sequencing and form. Narratives that persist today bear collective authority, which often emanates from photographic records (Tagg 1992:102) Memory is carried through cognitive and social processes, through the words we read and hear, the images we view, and the circumstances in which these happen or are mobilized at a later date. The importance of words, both written, as in headlines, and heard, as on the radio, cannot be over-estimated. Yet much of what we remember is derived from images, both still and moving. Zelizer (1998:6-7) suggests that if “words function much like the ‘index cards’ of shared memories ... [than] images depend on their material form when operating as vehicles of memory”. The media provide the materiality for those images – indeed, media acts as the system of both storage and retrieval for huge numbers of peoples.

Throughout the discussions, many of the remembered events were marked by a few iconic ‘moments’ –a protester standing in Tiananmen Square; Mandela waving to the crowd outside Jan Verster Prison in Cape Town. Many of the images recalled by one group were remembered in other countries as well, often countries divided by entire continents. The Indian, South African and Australian cohorts crystallised the Vietnam War in the single image of a naked, napalm-burnt girl running across the screen.

Writing on the power of images to evoke memory, Zelizer (1998:7) comments: “Few of us remember the name of the South Vietnamese village where children ran screaming from their napalmed homes into a photographer’s field of vision. ... But its resonance as an image of war atrocity – and invocation by U.S. antiwar groups during the sixties and seventies – stabilized its meaning precisely along its more schematic

dimensions. Collectively held images thus act as signposts, directing people who remember to preferred meanings by the fastest route”.

CONCLUSION: THOUGHTS ON INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Halbwachs, like other cultural and sociological thinkers, acknowledges collective memory is not a static entity —like identity, it too is negotiated. Depending on the particular historical and socio-political moment, “society represents the past to itself in different ways: it modifies its conventions. As every one of its members accepts these conventions, they inflect their recollections in the same direction in which collective memory evolves” (Coser, 1992: 173). A prime example of this is the way in which South Africa’s collective memory of racial and social classes has changed over the last two decades. In many ways, the nation is exerting concerted energies into reframing its understanding of relationships between individuals, communities, right and wrong. In her discussion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Sarah Nuttall (1998:88) wrote: “We are never [. . .] the first people to know who we are. But if collective memory is the outcome of agency in South Africa it may often seem that we need to approach the construction of memory from the other way round: Is it less, here, that private memories shape collective remembrance than vice versa? Does the challenge then become how we can create a collective memory that is multiple, flickering with the many meanings that individual experience can collectively bring to it?”

Nuttall puts her finger on the pulse of South Africa’s collective memory, which is multicultural, and radically changing in the post-apartheid era. However, according to Halbwachs’s conception of the relationship between the collective and the personal, we should always take precisely the ‘other way round’ approach when revising memory. For in his view, in almost all cases the collective point of view inspires an alteration of the personal viewpoint —this is the result of ‘interiorisation’. Nevertheless, beyond the directional flow of the change, it is important to note that collective memory constantly revises itself based on the knowledge and power relations of the present moment.

Halbwachs and others (see Edwards & Middleton, 1986) have maintained that language is an important component of the transmission, storage and retrieval of collective memory. Halbwachs positioned language as the “precondition for collective thought” (Coser, 1992: 173). Through verbal transmission in a commonly understood language, the collective viewpoint influences the personal. But memory is not only verbal: it is also visual.

Writing on the role of photography in producing a collective memory of the Holocaust, Barbara Zelizer (1998:3) observed, “unlike personal memory, whose authority fades with time, the authority of collective memories increases as time passes, taking on new complications, nuances and interests. Collective memories allow for the fabrication, rearrangement, elaboration and omission of details about the past, often pushing aside accuracy and authenticity so as to accommodate broader issues of identity formation, power and authority and political affiliation”.

In this view, memory is not a simple act of recall; rather, it is dependent on social, cultural and political action at its broadest level – as well as individual life-circumstances.

[i] For a full discussion of the methodology used, see the “Introduction” in Volkmer, I. (ed.) 2006 *Global Media Generations: A comparative study from twelve countries* (Frankfurt and New York: Peter Lang Publishers).

[ii] Based on Tomaselli, R. E. 2006 “Media Markers: Collective Memory and Active Forgetting” in Volkmer, I. (ed.) 2006.

[iii] The section on collective memory was written in conjunction with Deanne Peters (Nee Powers). The work contributed to her dissertation “Television, Memory and Identity: An Analysis of South African Youth and Fictional Programs” in partial fulfilment towards her Master’s Degree in Cultural and Media Studies, University of Natal, Durban, 1991.

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