

# Thinking outside the box

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1999

Gladius D. K. (1999). Thinking outside the box. In AMIC Annual Conference, 8th, on Asia: Information Poor to Information Rich - Strategies for the 21st Century, Chennai, Jul 1-3, 1999. Singapore: Asian Media Information and Communication Centre.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/92690>

**Paper No. 30**

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## THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

"We're not just on- off switches, and we're not just cheque books."

-- a TV viewer in UK.

### INTRODUCTION

When I was a little boy people used to ask me what I wanted to become when I grew up. "I want to be in a profession where there is no retirement!", was always my answer to them. As luck would have it I'm in the business of 'content production' for broadcasting and looking at the way TV channels have sprouted in Asia, it is pretty obvious that people like me will forever have our hands full, till we switch off to rest in our graves.

People can't seem to be able to live without TV. Television has become the fourth member in the family of fundamental needs - food, clothing, shelter and TV. Except in Japan and Singapore, which are already saturated markets, the rest of Asia witnessed a growth of about 140 percent in the number of households with a television set in the last decade. The hunger for programming has been growing steadily with more and more production houses coming up and International distributors setting up shop on Asian shores. But for the recent economic woes in the region, the mushrooming of TV programming would have gone on unabated.

### CASH CRUNCHED PROGRAMMING

The economic downturn sweeping across the continent, however, has resulted in decreasing advertising revenues and the ensuing cash crunch has led to a tightening of programming strategies. In all major markets in Asia terrestrial, cable and satellite operators have cut back on acquisitions, resorting to re-runs to fill air time and cut budgets for local productions.

They are also choosing more non-fiction formats that have some entertainment value and cost significantly less than fiction series, drama and sitcoms. Major distributors of TV programs indicate that offers for programming have fallen by nearly 50 percent in some cases - e.g. Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines.

So what we have are more and more of nature and science documentaries along with lifestyle, performing arts and travel, and, of course, the infomercials. Non-fiction programming has become a viable form of entertainment now. STAR TV for example has its share of Reality programming - e.g. When Animals Attack, World's Scariest Police Chases, When Disasters Strike etc. Discovery channel pegs its programming with the slogan "What have you discovered today?"

It is becoming fashionable to go factual, non-fiction and reality based. These programmers boast of "making possible the mediated discovery of the world for the viewer". But the question is how long can you go on with this - the trips on curiosity lane? And knocking your senses numb with those numerous infomercials which make virtue out of strange people plugging strange products?

While the choices seem unlimited what the viewer would prefer is convenience and quality. As some media boss commented, "there will always be a need for content that is not troublesome to get".

But whatever be the level of convenience- in terms of getting the content that fancies us instantly - the fact remains that people are more interested in programmes that have some bearing on their own lives. Local programming will always have an edge over global content, however exciting it might be. I will push back all my appointments to make it a point to go and watch my daughter sing at her school Annual Day than go to the best of western musicals visiting town. Broadcasters, especially the terrestrials, know this too well; without a sizeable chunk of local programming they cannot sustain viewership.

### THE 'SCHEDULING' GAME

By a careful mix of genres - news, soap operas, cop shows, period drama and sitcoms - broadcasters hope to build a maximum number of viewers and the right mix of social groups for the network or channel to sell to the advertisers. Scheduling, the traditional and historic method of organizing Television is coming under severe attack with the availability of limitless choice of channels and programs.

Creating the context, whereby the broadcaster attempts to hook and hold the viewer for the whole evening, or most of it, so that the sum of the whole is greater than the sum of it's parts - each program seen in the context of what goes before it and what comes after it - is becoming a tougher proposition. When viewers have an almost infinite capacity to switch to something else this rationale will bite the dust, and all advertising based TV operators will be hit severely by this "Death of Context."

The precise logic of media programming is to construct and cultivate a set of loyal audiences. Advertisers pay media companies for access to these audiences; audiences are thus delivered to the advertisers. The broadcasters play a vital role in the economy by producing these audiences, in larger numbers and in specific demographically desired forms, for advertisers.

### POWER AND RESPONSIBILITY

The problem with Television is that it is too powerful a medium to be left alone for commercial exploitation alone. It has the potential and power to reach the most private realms of the human psyche and shape the inner lives of people. What folklore did to human communities in the previous centuries is what TV does today, and more. TV has indeed become "the most powerful medium of cultural development."

Researchers have outlined the roles of Television - as a dominant mass medium - in modern times.

- 1) As an agent of social change - through its agenda setting functions
- 2) As a reflector of dominant values and
- 3) As a reinforcer, not only reflecting but strengthening dominant values, models and attitudes in society. Television can and does have considerable power to lead public opinion and seems to enjoy a certain 'credibility' that is far beyond belief. "Oh, its true, it was on TV!", is the summing up argument for many a point of view these days

## THE TEACHER IN THE LIVING ROOM

Statistics reveal that Television plays a crucial role in the process of socialization in children and re-socialization in adults. The UNDP in its Human Development Report in 1998 pointed out that Hungarian children spend 1,000 hours per year watching TV while attending school for 1,100 hours. In Japan the ratio is 800 to 1,300 while in the US it is 1,300 to 1,400. No wonder one sociologist said "Television is indispensably the most powerful medium of cultural intercourse in our global society."

Television transmits the myths, symbols and metaphors of our culture and as one researcher pointed out it is through this mass medium, 'individuals learn the distinctive patterns that fit them into particular place and subgroup.' (Hyman, 1974).

"The public's absorption and acceptance of Television's central myths - is the Curriculum of our times", intoned Neil Postman, the American critic.

A study conducted in the US on the effects of TV watching concluded that there are consistent patterns of difference between the light and heavy viewers' perception of the real world (Gerbner, 1990). Heavy viewers, it was found, tend to see the world more in line with its depiction on TV. Under representation on TV of a segment of the population (e.g. women or the aged) has been shown to correlate with a tendency to under-estimate their numbers in the real world.

"Immersion in this cultural system - participating in a coherent system of mass produced messages - cultivates basic perceptions about social reality - about what is right and what is good." (Gerbner, 1990). Vaclav Havel while visiting Washington opined, "those who have the mass media in their hands... bear the responsibility for the world, for the future of humanity."

Any and every media practitioner, therefore, has to be conscious of the social and cultural values that underpin his /her content production and this awareness should permeate all their activities. If the broadcast industry sees itself as a mere money making machine - abdicating its definite role as a public service institution - it will become a cheap assembly line churning out products that it justifies as what people want to watch.

## ROLE OF CONTENT PRODUCERS, REGULATORS

We can no more take a value-neutral position saying "A television set, is nothing more than a toaster with pictures", like Mark Fowler, the Chairman of the Federal Communication Council, U.S., did. Broadcasters should have the sensitivity to cultural pre-occupations rather than commercial or industrial objectives alone. National regulators in most countries, therefore, have always been concerned with tradition, history, cultural heritage - a peoples' very identity - when it comes to broadcast output.

What governments and the Broadcast Industry should do together is to

- 1) Develop a greater sensitivity to the ways in which culture shapes the direction of social and economic development and
- 2) Invest in processes that enhance and nurture cultural diversity and pluralism, even when this does not result in the direct creation of broadcast output.

We have to see more and more programs that reflect a wider diversity of cultural perspectives with a creative response to the emerging needs of culture and diversity. We

should come up with engaging programming, tapping the under-valued talent that resides all around us waiting for that little extra push.

The industry would benefit enormously from training and retraining creative and management staff and by encouraging independent TV producers and finding ways of giving them greater access to world markets.

It would be valuable and timely if governments retained the right to define, and create the funding for, a range of television related activity that the market, at that period, does not provide, or provide well enough.

## THE SINGAPORE INITIATIVES

The Singapore experience in this regard is an interesting case in point. The Singapore Broadcasting Authority has initiated the concept of commissioning Public Service Broadcast (PSB) programs, with in-house productions by broadcasters as well as outsourcing to independent production houses. The Local Industry Upgrading Program was initiated by the Economic Development Board (EDB) and supported by SBA and local broadcasters. Heritage, info - ed, current affairs, children's, culture docu-dramas and minority programs are produced and aired under this scheme.

The Public Advisory Committee of the SBA with its various sub committees, makes yearly recommendations which are implemented quite rigorously. Last year the committee said "The policy on TV programming and productions should be matched with an understanding of the potential influences of TV and the nuances of the local socio- cultural character. At present, there is a lack of understanding in these areas, and the committee recommends that relevant studies be undertaken." Quite candid and up front the committee was!

Some of the more specific recommendations of the committee were to call for more programmes on the arts, that should be aired on mass viewing channels like the TCS, and more children's programmes with local values and culture. The body also urged TCS to take proper measures 'to help nurture an intelligent, discerning audience'.

## BEING PROACTIVE, LATERALLY

I have a few thoughts on how we could not only nurture an intelligent and discerning audience but also develop the nuclei of programmes makers and creative personalities who will become the fountain head of culturally vibrant, intellectually stimulating programs that are also of a high entertainment value.

Firstly we have to approach it from the both 'here and now' angle and the long term vision - to be able to sustain a steady stream of creative output over a very long stretch.

1) Script Competition: While this may sound like a public lottery approach we must realize that there are scores of closet writers out there who are as yet undiscovered and undervalued. The incentive for them to come out and show themselves would-be the lure of the promise that winning entries will go into production with a professional production team, with top rated stars of the broadcaster in lead roles. While one cannot be assured of a certain minimum standard of writing in terms of instant producability - the writing that springs forth from lived- in experience and first hand encounters always tend to ring true with a sense of immediacy and relevance. We can at least be assured of exciting premises

that would become the core of exciting new drama series, current affairs programs or even cross-genre programs.

2) Showcasing local talent : Take your cameras and move into the Community Arts scene. The simple trick to make this a watchable program is to throw in high profile anchors to plug it. There is a lot going on at the college level arts associations and community centers that are worth putting a spot light on. This would encourage even more artistically inclined products. There can even be a round up of annual day cultural programs at the local schools and you will have a willing, sold and ready audiences of parents, teachers and the school kids.

3) Co-production with Focus Groups : Who can articulate and espouse women's issues than the women's associations and women's support groups themselves? It makes sense to link up with specific focus groups to make programs that look at their varied pre-occupation, problems, delights and dreams. Co-production deals with youth groups, consumer associations, legal education society, automobile association and even minority groups and clan associations would result in an array of interesting and absorbing reality based and factual programming.

4) Writing Awards : If a prominent broadcaster announces a prestigious yearly award for the best novelist and the best poet in the various regions of its operation, imagine the consequences! While the prize winning novel may not exactly be the best of raw material for your next high profile prime time drama series, the nurturing of writing and giving it prestige will result in the steady blossoming of creative expression. Writers do need this extra bit of lure in developing societies where writing may not yet be an attractive full-time profession. Secondly you are setting up a supply line that is one day going to open up a mother lode of exciting material.

5) Scholarship Programs : Broadcasters do spend a lot of money on training their staff. What they should actually be doing is to identify talented scholars in the field of media and communication studies and award them internships to work in high profile content production environments like Hollywood, Bollywood, South Indian Film and TV industry, in Japan, HongKong and Taiwan. Working as a lower level assistant in a production company can teach you in one month what the University will teach you in a year, and definitely more. I should know. I started as a fourth assistant for a film - maker after quitting my day job as an engineer. How I wish that somebody had given me a scholarship to do that!

6) Folklore projects : The tradition and culture of people is best captured in their folklore. Conventional forms of folklore are either slowly dying or have been cannibalized and assimilated into other forms like films, TV programs and stage plays and more often than not they have been vulgarized. A folklore project that documents and propagates folklore in its original form to Television audiences is definitely the need of the hour. Surprisingly the entertainment value of some of these undervalued forms are really high. If we make folklore click as part of a retro movement it will definitely click in a big way.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

These are some workable ideas that concerned government agencies and broadcasters should try out if they re serious about Public Service Broadcasting. In fact making Public Service Broadcasting a definite component of any commercial broadcasting and making it mandatory will go a long way in upholding cultural diversity and values of the communities and instilling a sense of history and community in them.

We should also formalize the occasional feed back we elicit from focus groups. The Viewers Consultative Councils in the UK is an interesting example to follow. Viewers who feel they have something to contribute should be allowed to express their views and this will give us valuable insights into the standard, relevance and acceptability of the programs. Their scope should also include the advertisement as well with taste and decency coming under scrutiny.

The battle between bottom line dictated programming and public service content, for the broadcasters and regulators, will be a continuous and contentious, if painful, one. But then without struggles there is no development and in the field of broadcasting content producers should never be content with just 'well made' programmes, and always watch out for what exactly gets into the viewer's mind. For, food poisoning is reversible and can be dealt with immediately, whereas the poisoning of the mind is an inexcusable mischief that borders on 'Crimes against Humanity'!

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**TELEVISION CORPORATION OF SINGAPORE**



**THE NEXT DECADE IN COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES**

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