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State of TV programs in Thailand

by

Patrick McGeown
Producer, BEC-TERO
Thai TV Channel 3

It could be said that Thailand is divided into two countries - Bangkok and Up Country. It has a population of sixty million of which 12% plus live in Bangkok. The majority of the population is poor by western standards. Prior to the economic problems we had a rising middle class but that has stopped growing for now. A rising middle class means more education. Education means a more sophisticated market.

WHO BROADCASTS?
Television is divided into terrestrial TV, cable TV and satellite. Terrestrial broadcast nationally; Cable to selected cities. There are six terrestrial stations - 3, 5, 7, 9, 11 and the UHF Channel ITV. Channel 11 does not feature on the official ratings guide although some of its shows are quite good. Mass market will view the main four stations. ITV is the "new kid on the block" and talking long term they are doing everything right - they have targeted themselves at the educated populace and their programs are making some heads turn. You could say they are "rocking the boat" of traditional Thai TV. Most of these stations show Thai language and Chinese dubbed programs.
For example in one week of last month the breakdown was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Channel 3</th>
<th>Channel 5</th>
<th>Channel 7</th>
<th>Channel 9</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td></td>
<td>25%</td>
<td></td>
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Recently the two cable giants merged, here UTV and IBC formed UBC. UBC’s subscription of $20 per month means only a small proportion of the population can watch it. Here English speaking programs are dubbed into Thai and English programs with Thai sub-titles are offered.

Like most Asian countries we have mass market. And mass market means - what the masses want the masses get - or what the masses are shown - the masses watch. This may be good or bad for the industry. From an advertising perspective this is good. From a creative perspective it makes it difficult to introduce new programs - because new programs need sponsors. And sponsors and advertising agencies use the same tried and true programs to advertise their products. It all comes back to money.

Advertising agencies look at numbers and figures. They look at ratings and the time the program goes to air. They do not look at how creative the program is, whether it is made by Asians or not, whether it comes from Thailand or not. This is very frustrating for new programs trying to get a slice of the sponsor’s budget to survive.

VIEWERS COMMENTS
We went on the road and asked the locals what shows do they prefer:
First we went to Siam Square near Chulalongkorn University. This is also a "trendy" area. Here we asked people of all ages what programs they preferred on television:

With Thai-made programs what specific type of programs do they like?
If the preferred Chinese or Japanese programs what type did they like?
If they liked Western programs what type did they like?
Also we asked do they think Thai programs needed greater creativity?
And if they could change something on Thai TV - what would it be that they change?

We also asked what was the last movie they went to see - was it a Foreign film or a Thai film?

And when was the last time they went to see a Thai film?

We also asked the same questions in Klong Toey - a poorer area near the wharves in Bangkok.

From a personal point of view I am lucky to be with Channel 3. They have given our show "Talk of the Town" a chance and have supported it all the way. But again I am lucky to have Volvo as a sponsor. They have been with me for over one year and invest in education - of which "Talk of the Town" is about. This sponsorship means it is easier to approach other sponsors - again it is money.

OVERVIEW OF THE MARKET

Without going into great detail the main terrestrial stations offer the market tried and true programs. Game shows, dramas (soap operas), movies and sports. Others include variety shows, educational, cartoons and foreign series. By far the most popular in Thailand are Games shows and Thai Dramas (soap operas). These pull in the ratings and money.

There is no set formula when you approach a TV station to air a program. All stations differ but some will offer greater assistance for new and creative shows. The split of advertising revenue could be different. And some stations will even offer recording studios free if they believe in the product also. A very positive point is that nearly all TV stations in Thailand are willing to listen and to explore opportunities - the door is not closed.

RATINGS

The television stations also have to be careful ratings. Because ratings being in the profits. If a TV station was to take a risk with a new program or drop a "tried and true" formula there is a good chance ratings could drop and not only for that time slot - also the following program.

MAIN STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS

So if you were to try and identify the main strengths and main weaknesses of Thai television you could say - mass market is the main strength - and it is
also the main weakness. If the mass market is content and the mass market is uneducated there is no demand to lift the creative content. Greater education will change this.

Thailand does not see foreign programs as "hogging" the airwaves or even that foreign programs are a bad thing. But Thai generally prefer Thai but do enjoy a foreign movie or mini series.

FILM INDUSTRY
Regarding Asian content an area of more concern is the film industry. Foreign films dominate the theatres and it has been said the percentage is very high - possibly in the 90's. But this is a no-win situation. How can you get more people to see "home-grown" films when they consider foreign films better? This means few people go to see the local films. The films that are produced in Thailand make little money. Therefore there is no incentive for investment in a local film. This in turn means less local films for television.

A good example of this was the Australian Film and Television Industry. In the 60's and early 70's films and locally produced television were considered inferior. In fact they were laughed at for being so amateur. And foreign films dominated the Australian cinemas and screens. But today it is a different story. During the mid to late seventies the government allocated much more budget to the "arts". This improved creativity, production and more. They also gave huge tax incentives to anyone who invested in a local film. Also the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) and the Australian Film and Television School became highly respected schools admired by many. And the various State Film Commissions started the ball rolling and the film industry was re-born. (Australia had a promising film industry in the 20's and 30's but lack of government support saw it practically disappear for many decades). Education and government support turned the Australian Film and Television industry from what the public considered "rubbish" in the 60's and 70's to something most Australian's are proud of today. It took 15+ years for this to happen.

Already many programming chiefs are looking at how to improve their station's content. But it must come from everyone - not just the TV stations. Like most businesses TV stations are out to make money but a wise TV station will invest in the future and also the future of its people. And investing in the future means allocating time to shows that offer something different; shows that are not "main stream" and are creative and innovative need air time. But why should a TV station be the only one to take the risk? Advertising agencies need to be more creative in their selection of programs for the client. They need to look further than just numbers and time slots. Also clients need to support and get behind new programs. What if clients with big budgets allocated 5% of their TV advertising budget to educational and trial programs.

Increasingly the creativity in Thailand's advertising has boomed in the past three years. It is of an international standard and humour is coming out more often than not - clients are demanding and getting greater creativity to advertise their products but they are not demanding that production...
companies produce better shows. Thailand has the creativity but it boils down to dollars and education and the support of the government and private sector.

To sum it up:-

If we are very, very careful - nothing very good or very bad will ever happen to us.....

BEC TERO, Channel 3, Bangkok. Page 7 21/8/98

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Day Three
September 4, 1998