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Children's Programme In Thailand:
The Unresolved Dilemma

By

Ubonrat Siriyuvasak
CHILDREN'S PROGRAMME IN THAILAND: THE UNRESOLVED DILEMMA

This paper is an attempt to provide an overview of the development of children's programme in Thailand in the 1980s. It starts with a brief description of how children's programme struggle to compete with other programmes in an era of rapid change within the television industry. Although there are many locally produced programmes at present the question of survival continues to plague the majority of children's programme producers. The key problems are - the lack of capital investment and insufficient revenue from advertisement. As a result, the quality of programmes are seriously affected.

From imported cartoons to local programmes

In the 1980s, there are indications of a shift in television content due to the bitter rating war. Criticism of the large percentage of foreign programmes on television is an added pressure for the change that took place. In order to be less dependent on imported programmes several new forms were being experimented with. The most successful ones are Thai dramas, quizz shows and pop concerts, coinciding with the growth of the music industry. Children's programmes also gathered new momentum during the same period. The following is a brief description of how it came about.

The energy shortage in 1981 due to severe drought in the north and north east of Thailand has led to many measures to conserve electricity. Television blackout during 18:30-20:00 hrs was imposed by the government. The argument was that members of the family could enjoy the evening together without any disruption. At the time, the press was strongly against the closure. The Mass Communication for Children's Promotion Project (MCPP) of the Foundation for Children's Development however, openly supported the government's move.
This was followed by its proposal in 1983 for all television stations to allot the evening slot, between 17:00-18:30 to children’s programme. The proposal was the first attempt to call for a definite space for children’s programmes. Prior to The Seminar on Children’s Television organised by the MCPP children’s programmes were mostly shown on Saturday and Sunday mornings. The late afternoon/early evening slot was generally allocated to Thai dramas (repeated series) or documentaries from various government agencies. In its resolution, the seminar also called for more locally produced programmes as opposed to imported cartoons from Japan and the US. In addition, it proposed that there should be more Thai dramas during the prime time slot instead of American and Hong Kong series.

The proposal, which coincided with the views of media commentators and the academics, received positive responses from the Broadcasting Directive Board (BDB). Thus, the BDB made a special request to all television stations (there were four channels: channel 3, 5, 7, and 9) to provide a specific slot for children’s programme and to support more locally produced programme. But most stations were reluctant to comply. Their main objection was the uncertainty of getting sufficient support from advertisement.

At any rate, drama production companies were enthusiastic about the open opportunity. The impetus has injected a new direction for the television industry as a whole. Consequently, Thai drama series started to mushroom. But whilst drama took on a fresh start children’s programme on the contrary, was trailing slowly behind. They were faced with many difficulties especially from the lack of advertisement revenue. Since children are not the buyer of product advertisers prefer to advertise in adult programmes such as dramas, game/quiz or variety shows. Another major problem is the lack of production experience. Although producers are highly creative they are not familiar with the medium and the art form which suits television and its young audiences.
The television industry and its commercial logic

The Thai television industry is a dual system in which media corporations and advertisers operate under legal state ownership. Channel 9 is owned and run by the state enterprise, the Mass Communication Organization of Thailand (MCOT). Its second channel, Channel 3, is operated by the Bangkok Entertainment, Co. which received its third consecutive franchise in 1990. In parallel to these two channels, the Army owns and operates Channel 5 whilst given the franchise of Channel 7 to Krungthep Torathat, Co. This means that television works largely within the logic of the capitalist economy with the exception of Channel 11. In this structure, the state must struggle to maintain its political control vis a vis commercial control from the de facto owner of the station.

Children's programmes are probably the worst affected by the complex relationship in this dual system. Although new programmes were created during the mid-1980s such as Supawan Suansilpong's Weldek (Channel 9), Kietsuda Pirom's Yim Yeryae (Channel 3) they failed miserably. The main reason was the lack of advertisements. For the stations and advertisers, they generally choose to support programmes with a high audience rating. As one commentator pointed out, within the last three years, the number of children's programmes has decreased by more than 50%. However, there are two programmes on Channel 5 which are now into their second decade. They are Sao Sanuk, produced by the Centre for Educational Technology (aired on Saturday morning), and Pung Noi, produced by Patajari Isiri (aired on Monday evening). Both programmes are variety shows for children aged between 5-10.

Since the government lifted the blackout in 1989 the time slot for children's programme has been expanded. Except for Channel 9 each station spreads its programmes between 17:20-19:30 on weekdays and a number of new
programmes have thus emerged. They are of different formats - folk drama (Mani Archa) and magazine programme on Channel 3 (Jiew Jaew Joa Loke), family drama on Channel 5 (Baan Suksan), quiz show on Channel 7 (Nu Tam Dai). However, these programmes must have a large amount of capital investment in order to have a strong foothold and consequently, draw a sizeable audience. For many children's programme this is not to be the case. The family drama, Baan Suksan on Channel 5, for example, was cancelled, after it was on air for six months, because it drew little audience compared with Nang Fa Si Rung, a similar genre, on Channel 7.

While the evening slot is given to independent producers all commercial stations continue to broadcast their own children's programmes on the best time slot of the week. These Japanese and American cartoons are scheduled on Saturday and Sunday mornings exclusively for young viewers. Not surprisingly, none of the independent producers dare to broadcast their programmes on Saturday and Sunday mornings. But nonetheless, Channel 5, together with Kantana Production, has scheduled its family drama, Baan Ni Mai Nao Rak, on Sunday morning as an experiment. In this way, independent producers must not only struggle to compete against each other they also have to compete with imported cartoons.

For the more established programme such as Pung Noi on Channel 5 (Monday at 18:57) the situation is starkly different. Its producer, Patajari Isiri, said there are now three regular sponsors - Fanta (soft drink), Baby Mild (talcum powder) and the Telephone Organization of Thailand, and a variety of smaller advertisers which made the programme possible. These also provided for the expansion of the programme. For example, the investment for a new TV studio, the provincial network and a range of other children's products from the programme.
But since audience rating is the sole measurement for success, the tension between advertisers and producers is aggravating. Most producers are discontented with the rating figure and its sampling method monopolised by a single media research company. Pawornwan Punsirirat, producer of Daruntham for example, said it is unfair to rate adult programmes with children's programmes. In addition, the survey is usually based on data gathered in Bangkok Metropolis and does not reflect the viewing of children in the rural areas. The results of these commercial audience surveys invariably show that cartoons and films for children are the two most popular types of programmes. The majority of producers however, believe that it is misleading and they are adversely affected by the rating system widely used in the television industry.

The question of artistic creation and audience reception

As most of the producers clearly demonstrated, their survival depends entirely on whether the programmes generate enough revenue to cover production costs. But more significantly, the evening slot has become very costly, especially on stations which reach a large number of audiences. As a result, most of the advertising revenue generated is paid for the broadcast time rather than for producing the programme itself. The programme Nu Than Dai on Channel 7 (Friday at 18:30) for example, spent only 10% of its revenue on production. Daruntham on Channel 5 (Friday at 18:01) on the other hand, fails to attract advertisement because it is scheduled on an earlier slot in the evening.

Despite the limits on production budget, some of the recently created programmes are well received among their intended audiences. Producers of Jiew Jaew Joa Loke, Nu Than Dai and Daruntham assert that they are greatly encouraged by positive responses from their young viewers. Interestingly,
findings from the MCPP's survey showed a mix between the producers' claims and the commercial audience survey. The 1990 MCPP survey finds that rural children prefer the locally produced programmes while those in the urban areas, Bangkok in particular, watch more cartoons. It could be seen that the cultural tastes of these two groups are distinctively different.

When we take a closer look at the viewing patterns of children in the rural areas we find that their programme preference is shaped by their social and cultural contexts. First of all, about 1/3 of the total of 45 children (from 11 villages in Surin) have their own television and only 1/15 watch everyday. The majority of the children gather to watch at neighbouring houses. Secondly, although they would rather watch cartoons they have to watch dramas instead. It is adults in the family or adult owners who make the decision about which programme to watch. Drama, therefore, rank first among the list of programmes preferred by rural children. However, cartoon is at the top of the list for preference among children's programmes. They like adventure stories and a lot of humour. The Red Ninja and Pop-Eye are their favourite. For the locally produced programmes rural children enjoy quiz shows and variety programmes such as Nu Tham Dai, and folk dramas on Channel 7 and 3.

As for children in Bangkok Metropolis, 31 out of the 34 respondents have a television set and more than half have 2-3 sets. The respondents are drawn from the lower and middle classes. The findings show that they get to watch more television than those in the rural areas. For example, 58% watch all day on Saturday and Sunday and 60% watch every evening. There are 79% who get to watch until ten o'clock. It could be seen that children in the urban areas have more access to television and watch a great deal more than children in the rural areas.

From this different social context, urban children not only have the opportunity to watch more television but they get to make their own choice of
programme. Although they usually watch with one or two members of the family very few parents imposed their choice over the children. As a result, cartoon is the foremost programme whereas film and drama rank second and third. They prefer Pop-Eye similar to children in the rural areas. But the other favourites, Dragon Ball and Senseya, are the most popular Japanese cartoon at the time of the survey. These stories are complex and their presentation style is modern as opposed to Red Ninja preferred by rural children.

When asked about locally produced children's programme the preferences are scattered. Top of the list is Pung Noi followed by Lek Prick Ki Nu, Nu Tam Dai, Loke Si Kao, Witayasat Na Ru and Yim Yer Yae. It is clear that the children prefer the excitement of quiz show as much as variety show which allow for children's participation and creativity. The respondents also watch a lot of dramas, documentaries, news, sports, music, game show and talk show.

From the MCPP survey and other surveys a number of observations could be made about audience reception of children's programmes. Firstly, children prefer fantasy and fictional stories presented in cartoons. However, Bankgok viewers are more sophisticated in terms of story line and technique of presentation. Aided by a range of media products urban children have acquired an artistic taste unexperienced by rural children. Secondly, since children in the rural areas do not have their own choice neither do they have access to other media for children their programme preferences and cultural taste is largely shaped by adults and their rural context.

As demonstrated by the above survey, in order to communicate with children viewers artistic creation is essential. Cartoon is fun to watch because both the artistic form and the story are appealing. But it is highly expensive to produce. For the Thai producers the question of artistic creation is closely related to the amount of capital available for production.
Although most producers realise the problem they are facing, an impasse. As Atcharapan Paibunsuwan aptly put it:

"...we have to limit our production budget and concentrate purely on the content instead of developing any artistic style of presentation, it is unfortunate but we think we'll have to go on relying on ourselves...there is no other way..."

Without the necessary resources and support from the station and advertisers, assisted by a clear state policy, it is difficult to improve the quality of children's programmes. The dilemma of resorting to simple and inexpensive format as opposed to more artistic style shows that it remains an unresolved problem.

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3 September 1991

Footnotes

1 Mass Communication for Children's Promotion Project, Seminar on Children's Television, Bangkok, 1983

2 The only public television station, Channel 11, started in 1987, is owned by the Public Relations Department.

3 Ladproa 91, "Are you deceiving the children?", Inside TV, 31 Aug-6 Sept, 1991, p.3.


6 Interview with Atcharapan Paibunsuwan, producer, August, 1991.

7 Interview with Pawornwan Punsirirat, producer, August, 1991.