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TV Content - The Asian Way
Balancing Audience Preferences and Needs

Introduction

Good Morning, ladies and gentleman. A year’s lapse has been a lot of change in the Television industry in Asia. We are all affected by the economic slowdown. Nonetheless with all the satellite launches prior to the economic upheaval, we still have to prepare ourselves with the onslaught at satellite Television.

Asia has to seriously consider the various implication of direct television, broadcasting satellites on, our state machinery and missionary, local television who are not homogeneous, and of course, the business stakeholders both foreign and domestic, who will influence to a large degree of the programme production, distribution and transmission. In other words, it is the potential impact of this flow of transferred programming that is of ultimate concern to Asia.

In line with that, I would like to quote on Malaysian Minister of Information, Datuk Sri Mohamad Rahmat as saying:

"Asia has been invaded many times in its history by colonialists and imperialist. We have been subordinated politically and economically. Even in ASEAN we had political masters for hundreds of years from five different countries. In spite of all these invasions, our culture and our family values have remained intact."

(Dato Mohamad Rahmat, May 12 1994)

The question we have to answer now is whether we can still remain intact and still opt for our local culture when the skies are fully open with all the novelty of satellite television.

We all know that technology is supposed to have its functional utility. But if the functions are more disruptive than rejuvenating, then something has to be done in order to lessen the mad-made social problems. We hope that the social obligations of DBS entrepreneurs can outweigh their economic concerns. We are saying that technology is turning the world into a global village. If this concept of a truly global village fits the Asian connotation of a village, which is closeness, mutual respect and cooperation, then we would have no reason not to welcome DBS.
Television is an integral part of the lives of millions of people around the world. Everyday, more and more people have the opportunity to watch their favorite programs. Television is a common bond between people, a shared experience in a world full of differences, dangers and challenges. Television can make the world seem smaller, uniting rather than dividing, crossing national and cultural boundaries.

As TV becomes more universal in today's technological world, people are encountering a range of new experiences that their forefathers could never have imagined. Their lives will be shaped to some extent by what they see on television.

Although TV is an important part of the lives of everybody, not many people have the say in the selection, content or production of what they see. They have little opportunity to broadcast their views to their peers. Therefore, I would say that it is up to the stations if they want to dedicate themselves to solving the ills of the world and improving the human condition on a global scale.

At the most general level, it means that the TV stations need to promote healthy communities, peace among nations and economic sustainability. Specifically, I would say that television programmes should be encouraged to look at ways to develop understanding of poverty and economic inequality, violent, civil conflict, population dynamics, environmental conservation, children and youths, arms reduction, ecosystems, reproductive choices and a host of other topics.

Preferences and Needs

Programs are only as good as the audience it can attract. Therefore, finding an audience is as important as making successful programs or successful programming. Bearing this in mind, how do station programmes balance audience preferences and needs.

Most programmes do not want to think about it. They prefer to go along with what the audience likes, i.e., preferences. But there are stations that look into what the audience should know, i.e., needs.

I have always believed that if we show intelligent programming, as long as there's some intelligence or artistry or creativity, the majority of the audience, regardless of where they come from or their level of education, are pretty together people. They can figure it out. If anything, I find television is guilty of, is underestimating its audience.

Asian TV stations should look at doing programmes that force people to look harder at the things that surround them. We have to be realistic; most Asian countries are still developing and yet we are carried away with a lot of western programmes that consist mostly of music, action-packed movies and series, and sitcoms that lulls us from realities. There are also good western programmes like National Geographic Discovery and others. But these are not so favoured by our people. Is it the station who does not want to schedule such programmes or is it because there's no advertising support?
Not many stations in Asia are willing to put documentaries or information type of programmes in prime time. In France, Canal + was the channel that brought back the documentary as a genre appreciated by audiences and critics. They started screening wildlife films in prime time. It was regarded as, at best, a novelty and, at worst, as stupid. But gradually, attitudes began to change, especially when the documentaries started to win ratings. As a commercial station, they were under no obligation to do that, but Catherine Lamour, Director of Documentaries, believed in quality programmes and since then, ie, 3 years ago their example forced other channels to open up slots for documentaries stand by its vision and mission.

In Malaysia, Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) a government owned station is always putting audiences need first. They have come out with programmes like “Cuba-Cuba”, a Do-it-yourself programme showing how to mend things around the house without spending a lot. “Fiker Dulu” is a programme asking audience to think first before they spend their money on something. The pros and cons of a product is put forth for the audience to consider before they decide. “Global” is a talk show on current issues. “Green Green” is a programme in agriculture, showing audience how to go about using their plot of land to the maximum. Documentaries and magazine shows are also part of their programming.

But all these programmes are not showing the numbers that advertisers want to see. Hence, these programs are without sponsors or even spot-buys. How long can RTM survive without revenue coming in? The answer is, you see a decline in quality programmes that audiences need. We see more music programmes, more dramas, sit-coms and variety shows that advertisers are willing to spend their money in.

Yes, I do not deny that we need entertainment but we also need information and some education. Hence, we should be looking at doing programmes that are edutainment and infotainment.

When I was the controller of TV2 in RTM, I dedicated 2½ hours on Friday, Saturday and Sunday to children. The 2½ hours was filled up with 3x5 mins. News for the children called Golden Kids News (GKN). I got this idea from WTIC Fox 69 in Hartford, Connecticut while I was doing my internship. But I made some changes, in the sense, Fox Kids News was written by an adult (the producer of the show) but our GKN is written and hosted by the kids themselves and in their own style. Even the interviews were done by the kids. They have interviewed people like Kofi Anand, United Nations Secretary-General, Malaysia’s Prime Minister and many others. Besides this news, the children’s belt, which is called Golden Kids Belt, also came out with the concept of tuition on air for children. This programme is called “Kanak-Kanak Kilat” (Lightning children). It is a quiz show that is based on the school curriculum. Therefore children are not wasting their time watching TV, in fact, they are doing revision by joining the studio participants answering the questions. We also have another programme called “Pintan Pintas” (smart & fast). Here one school team compete with another school team. Team members have to pass physical obstacle and the minutes earned will determine how long they get to answer questions and form words. In other words, it is a test of the brains and the brawns. We try to make these educational programs as interesting as possible so as not to bore the kids.
Coming back to kids news, it was able to earn 4 points ratings with approximately 1,200,000 viewers at 9 am and 10 am. The belt started with the controller of TV2 thinking that children needed these kind of programming and it turns out that they too preferred that kind of program. This proves a point that familiarity will lead to love.

As mentioned earlier, there are certain stations that prefer to go along with the audience preferences. Once they have identified their audience preferences trend, they keep doing more and more of the similar concept even though there's nothing educational or informative. This is trend that most Asian TV stations are following.

In Malaysia, there's one particular TV station which is able to draw audience ratings and Ad. Support but if you look at the content of their programmes, most of it is just trash. They go for sensational news, slap-stick comedy, cheap jokes and a lot of musical programmes and action stories. To top it, these programmes are produces in house.

The question here is, what is the station thinking when they produced such programmes?

Program acquisition is a combination of things, you have to look at the evidence on screen, at the pedigree of the production team, the chance of the show's survival and the overall quality of the show, is it innovative or cutting edge? Finally, you have to think about how the show will fit into the needs of your schedule.

Here we are talking about content, production values & innovativeness but the trump cards are actually in the hands of the advertisers. TV Programming is now being dictated by the advertising agencies. They are not talking about quality or needs but audience preferences.

Possibility of Change in Content Provides

It is forgone conclusion that “quality programmes” carry the day, whether local or foreign. Asian viewers prefer to watch varieties of programs produced locally and abroad.

There are two main categories of local programmes, namely, those that are produced in-house by the networks and those privatised or formed out to local production houses. The expansion of the local production is pragmatic approach to synergise the local talents to meet the local demands and soon regional demands and international distribution.
Right now the trend is on the uphill and the demand is coming from within the Asian countries. More and more channels are being launched in Asia.

This is where the programs providers come into play. The various players involved in a cobweb of networking will have to find a clear vision and direction. Business alliances, buying overs, mergers and joint ventures are not only happening among the U.S., Europeans and Japanese companies but also among the Asian companies.

Content providers the stations are not only locals but a mix between locals and foreigners. We see a lot of joint ventures and co-productions between Asean countries and the regional players and soon with the global giants. No matter who the content providers are, they still have to abide to the nonus and sensitivities of our Asian culture and politics.

In 1958, Brigadier General Homer A. Bonshey, U.S. Air Force First Director of Advanced Technology, said that “he who controls the moon controls the earth”. That was said at a time when 10 percent of the world’s population were using 90 percent of the world’s spectrum. Now there are hundreds of artificial moons in the open sky and Asia owns a number of them. That means that we have the potential to turn Asia into a centre for television industry. It needs a little bit of strategising and training and Asia can then leap-frog.

In planning the future, the views and aspirations of the different peoples in the international community need to be respected, not just the voice of the powerful and the vocal, but also the deafening sounds of the silent majority.

Here again the balance between audience preferences and need is tricky. On one hand, we would like to do “programming with integrity” and on the other hand we don’t see the numbers, ie ratings, and the advertising support. Recently I read an article that said that Grant Tinker and his brigade of moral tub thumpers, denounce the gerry springer show as debasing to the broadcast industry. Yes, this show is not going to received any awards for quality programming but it is receiving an average audience share of 6.5%. So the producers of the gerry springer show is saying “who cares to feel little isolated in their ivory towers.

Conclusion:

Yes, in conclusion I would say that we would like to do programs that make us feel good, but we need to do programmes that attract an audiences especially Asian audience—that is the bottom line.

It is an indisputable fact that advertisers will come in around programmes if the viewing numbers are there - regardless of quality. Much as I would like to shown the advertising industry with applause for their so-called integrity, it is naïve to suggest that they reserve their spend for quality programming.
Stating a desire for trash TV may be an abomination to those executives who deal in giving the audience what they think they should have. But the cut-two at nature of Television programming, coupled with relentless pressure for respective ratings, is simply too powerful a lobby for many idealism versus commercial survival.

Therefore, the role of media on TV according to the Asian mould is the willingness on the part of Asian Media stakeholders to accommodate the needs of the changing times without sacrificing moral principles and values. The former Deputy Prime Minister, Dato' Seri Anwar Abrahim once said “It is not so much the ownership of the media which is crucial here. Rather, it is the manipulation of the media by vested and selfish interests who have no regard whatsoever for truth, fairness or any other ethical and moral consideration.... On media must take up the gauntlet and in so doing, herald the beginning of the Asian renaissance”. With that....

Thank you ladies and gentlemen.
Session V
TV Entertainment Programmes:
Opportunities & Limitations
Country Presentations from Indonesia & China

Sumita Tobing
He Yujie