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Paper No. 18
TV ENTERTAINMENT PROGRAMS IN THE PHILIPPINES:
OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS
BY NESTOR U. TORRE

In the 1990s, television has become a major media and entertainment industry in the Philippines. The collective net income of our seven channels is in the billions of pesos, and television now rivals the movies in popularity.

Cognizant of their popularity and power, the major TV channels no longer accept local programs produced by outsiders. News and public affairs shows now also enjoy increased viewership.

In the past, some channels used to air a lot of canned shows from abroad, but the fall of the peso along with other Asian currencies has made these programs more expensive to secure, so more local productions have been initiated as a cost-cutting measure.

What makes television so popular in the Philippines?

The highest-rating shows offer a lot of star value to attract viewers. Many movie stars now have regular TV programs, and they also act in TV movies, which have also become popular.

The program types that draw the greatest number of viewers are situation comedies, soap operas, telenovelas from South America, dramatic anthology shows and magazine shows that focus on crime, sex and superstitious beliefs.

In general, therefore, it can be said that Philippine television at its most popular appeals to the least common denominator of viewer by servicing his most basic viewing preferences with TV equivalents of the sensational material found in tabloid newspapers that go in for so-called “yellow” journalism.

The rise of “tabloid television” is a fairly recent development in the Philippines. It can be seen as the result of the increased competitiveness, or “the war of the TV networks,” that now obtains on the local TV scene. This
competitiveness is in turn the result of the increased income potential that TV now enjoys in the Philippines.

This cutthroat competition is most evident between the top two channels, 2 and 7, which constantly try to dislodge each other from the top slots in the ratings by coming up with sensational programs that some parents and teachers complain about because they are potentially disturbing for young viewers, since they offer up negative values and excessively graphic material.

These are some of the weaknesses of TV entertainment shows in the Philippines. As for the strengths, these include some programs that present positive material for young audiences in an imaginative manner; magazine and public affairs shows that help viewers get to the core of a social issue or illuminate a complex news event, and business programs that provide helpful tips for budding entrepreneurs.


These good shows are less than 10 percent of total local programming, which goes to show how extensively "tabloid television" has taken over the TV industry. But they serve as beacons in the gathering dark, slicing through the general gloom of exploitation and "pragmatism" that pervades the Philippine TV scene.

In a sense, it can be said that Philippine TV and its millions of viewers are victims of the television industry's own success. The increased popularity of television in the Philippines has seduced channel executives into
concentrating on how to dominate the market by attracting the greatest number of viewers, through fair means or foul.

Another negative effect of this excessively ruthless competition has been the jazzing up and watering down of television news, which hasn't been spared from being sensationalized by the avid exponents of tabloid television.

Some TV news programs present the day's happenings not as factual events but as "exciting" items in which the line dividing news and entertainment has been blurred.

Choice of news items to highlight is canted in favor of crime stories and unusual events, while major news stories are sometimes glossed over because they are "not exciting" or are too complex to sum up in a telling sound bite or video clip.

Also blurred is the line dividing fact and opinion, as newscasters sometimes color the news with their own asides and facial reactions. This is designed to "personalize" the news, thus adding to its viewer-friendly appeal, but the dangers inherent in this practice cannot be gainsaid.

TV news persons and commentators have acquired a lot of power, which some of them don't know how to use in a mature, objective way. This indicates a lack of supervision from the top, probably because some channel executives are afraid of ruffling the feathers of popular news and public affairs on-camera talents, for fear of their being pirated away by competing channels.

This also suggests that there's something wrong with the selection and training of TV news talents; some clearly have wrong notions of what news is, and how it is supposed to be handled on television. We see the problem even in the young news talents who are starting their careers on television. Many are glib and personable, and they are also very opinionated, emphasize the
exciting rather than the factual, and zealously imitate what senior news talents are doing, mistakes and wrongheaded notions included.

A growing trend in Philippine television is the "youthening" of the medium, since viewership profiles indicate that the TV audience is now dominated by children and teenagers. While this development can help revitalize the TV industry and its products, it also exposes the medium and its viewers to the dangers of perpetual adolescence.

Child and teen talents used to be limited to shows for kids and teens, but they have become so popular that they are now guesting in or topbilling situation comedies, drama authology shows and soap operas that used to cater to an older viewership.

This hard-sell appeal to the youth market has made the overall profile of local TV programming more puerile and juvenile than it should be. Another popular trend that has contributed to this increased level of silliness is the so-called show biz talk and magazine show, which deals with gossip, controversy and scandals involving entertainment stars.

Summing up, all of these debit points of the Philippine TV industry are the result of a "tabloid TV" mentality, which in turn is the result of heightened competition, brought about by the huge income that TV channels now generate, as compared to what they were earning 10 years ago.

How can this disheartening situation be improved? Channel executives have to remind themselves of their responsibilities to the viewing public, and make sure that the people working under them toe the line. The self-regulating TV industry body, known as the Kapisanan ng mgz Brodkaster so Pilipinas, has to become more vigilant and has to act more decisively to penalize excessive "tabloid TV" practices.
Even more urgent is the need for viewers to become more demanding and less forgiving. In private, many viewers say that they're fed up with the excesses of Philippine television, but few make these opinions known in public, where they can do some good.

It's time for viewers, specially parents and educators, to realize that tabloid television is warping the minds of young viewers and giving even adult viewers wrong ideas about what constitutes legit news and wholesome entertainment. If the channels and their so-called self-regulating industry organization can't keep TV talents in line, then viewers have to protest to make the industry realize that its audience refuses to be exploited for the sake of higher ratings and profits.

Now, to the second part of this essay: Sources of new ideas and concepts for entertainment programs in the effort to project Asianness of TV content:

For a long time now, Philippines TV has looked to the west, not to Asia, for much of its imported programming. Since the Philippines was colonized by Spain and America, this predisposition to western concepts of entertainment is perhaps to be expected.

It is heartening to note, however, that due to a rise in awareness brought about by ASEAN and more frequent business and cultural exchanges between Asian nations, Filipino TV people today are more aware of the Asian context, particularly in news coverage.

Still, it must be said that most other program types don't reflect this heightened awareness of our being a part of Asia. How do we encourage this? We have a couple of programs that focus on other countries and their culture, but these are shown during "dead" hours and are rather stodgily produced, so they haven't made much of an impression.
A more positive development is the practice of some travel or magazine shows to do video coverages of other Asian countries. Since these features are imaginatively presented, viewers find them enjoyable as well as educational, so audience recall is strong and favorable.

Indeed, a lot more can be done to deflect Filipino viewers’ over-avid attention on the west, and to make them more aware of their more immediate and relevant Asian context. A program on ASEAN concerns and developments would be a good additional input, but it should be presented in a lively, imaginative, personalized way to truly get viewers interested.

Some Filipino producers of TV movies have filmed abroad, in countries like the United States and Italy. They can also be encouraged to shoot TV movies in Asian countries, with storylines involving Filipinos and characters native to those countries. This would be another dynamic way to highlight the Asian context of Filipinos’ lives.

Now that the entire Asian region is reeling from financial problems, Asians in different countries see more clearly how their fortunes have become more interrelated than ever before. Our business programs could make it a point to emphasize and explain this in layman’s terms, and the clarification would be valuable and illuminating to viewers.

The use of ethnic and indigenous musical instruments and musical forms in our entertainment programs can also be explored. Indeed, this is already happening on the increasingly popular band scene in the Philippines, with new musical groups experimenting with making native music popular today. Some groups have been successful in this, and their unique music is being showcased on some musical programs on television, as well as on MTVs that help popularize their recordings.
Finally, what are the changes in TV entertainment programs that are being implemented or are desirable to address changing audience preferences and values?

First, let's address actual audience preferences, and how they are changing. In the Philippines, that means more programs for young audiences; more soaps, telenovelas and situation comedies, and greater emphasis on violence, sex, gossip and superstitious beliefs. These are being addressed by the production of programs that cater to these actual or perceived preferences.

But we submit that, if all that television does is unselectively give the audience what it says it wants, this will suck both the TV industry and its viewers into a descending spiral of ever-diminishing expectations.

Clearly, therefore we must balance what the audience wants with the public service that commercial TV channels promise to render in exchange for getting their franchise to operate from the government. This is not a franchise to just make lots of money, but a permit that carries with its perks the obligation to serve the viewer as an entire, three-dimensional person, not just an aggregation of basic drives and needs.

So, let's adjust the question to read: what are the changes in TV entertainment programs that should be implemented to help develop the viewer in his totality? In that new light, the answers change considerably:

News programs must restore the supremacy of objective fact over subjective opinion or rumor and distracting entertainment values in news programs.

Entertainment programs should not demean or insult people just to get a laugh or to score a telling dramatic point.
Public affairs or magazine shows should not exploit violence, sex, gossip, scandal and superstitious beliefs to keep viewers glued to their TV sets, because these are basic absorptions and kneejerk responses that don't help a person develop mature, responsible thinking.

And there should be a greater emphasis on more wholesome and values-building programs for young viewers. It has been proven in other TV cultures that children brought up on responsibly-produced and imaginative programs grow up into adult viewers with astute viewing standards and preferences that prompt TV producers to come up with substantial shows.

Without an informed, demanding audience, television could sink down to a "least common denominator" kind of programming that is potentially harmful to young viewers. So, if TV workers balk at doing their best, televiewers have to speak up to protect themselves from the facile excesses of commercial television, where sheer viewing numbers mean huge profits and power.

Let's end this piece on a positive note: While TV programming is often compromised by the profit motive, there are still many opportunities available for responsible TV people to rise above the commercial TV system's limitations.

The best incentive to do well is for them to realize that the viewers their programs reach and affect are not mere numbers in a ratings war, but individuals with minds and hearts that can be influenced for good or for bad by the TV programs they watch.

The opportunity to affect hundreds of thousands or even millions of viewers is an awesome privilege for people who work in television. With greater awareness and better preparation, they can do right by their audience and do the TV industry proud.
Session VII
Enhancing Quality in TV Entertainment Programmes

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Padhraic O Dochartaigh