

# Implications of Recent Trends in Local Television Industry on Programming Content

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## INTRODUCTION

SINCLAIR, Jacka and Cunningham describes the trend toward privatization, or deregulation, of broadcasting systems that has taken place in Europe in the mid 1970s as part of a broader movement towards a 'post-Fordist' mode of economic and political organization (1995). Globalization, trade liberalization, increased national and international competitiveness, and a decline in the role of the state as a provider of goods and services were cited as the four main constituents of post-Fordism or late capitalism (Sinclair et. Al., 1995). Global operations require global markets which in turn demand deregulation of national markets (Hamelink, 1995).

By the early 1990s, the winds of change brought by economic and trade liberalization policies has swept through the countries of Asia. The advent of the new media services, primarily subscription and satellite-broadcasting services, have ushered in the second wave of television privatization and deregulation in Malaysia in mid-1995. Eleven years earlier, in the euphoria of the national privatization policy, the monopoly of the state over the national broadcasting system was shattered by a policy of television privatization and enhanced commercialization. The first private television station (TV3) was introduced and a substantial part of local television production was commissioned to independent production houses. Corporate sponsorship of particular time slot/television program was

also advanced. The transformation of the national broadcasting system from a hybrid state-commercial model was further shaped by the entrance of a second advertising-funded free-to-air station (Metrovision Channel 8), a pay TV channel (MegaTV) and the domestic satellite broadcasting service (ASTRO) since mid 1990s.

These changes in the financial bases of the Malaysian broadcasting industry have spawned a new breed of broadcasting content that is oriented towards entertainment and consumerism. Terms such as infotainment and infomercial are used to justify the blurring of boundaries between information, entertainment and commercial content. Broadcast stations capitalized on the public's sense of narcissism in the drive to cut down production costs necessitated by increased air time and channel capacity. Thus, the rise to 'stardom' and celebrity status of certain local talents and 'experts' in the television industry. The incorporation of the public as participants in game, quiz, talent, breakfast, children, youth, women and talk shows appears to give the impression of increased participation of the civil society in the public sphere. But, in reality, their participation is more of providing a pool of cheap cultural 'laborers/workers' and a ready market for consumer products that are promoted via the airwaves.

Hence, in this paper, I will attempt to reveal how the arrival of the new media services on the Malaysian broadcasting industry since 1995 have influenced the orientation of television programs towards increased commercialization and commodification and further integrated the audience into the market.

### COMMERCIALIZATION, COMMODIFICATION AND CONTENT

The notion of 'commercialism' (the condition) or 'commercialization' (the process) is firmly fixed in the early critique of mass culture and still vital at the periphery of the discussion (definitely in the context of media policy). While at one level the term 'commercialism' may refer objectively to particular free-market arrangements, it has also come to imply consequences for the type of media content which is mass-produced and 'marketed' as a commodity, and also consequences for the relations between media suppliers and consumers (McQuail, 1996, 106). The term 'commercial' identifies correlates of the competitive quest of large markets. From this perspective, commercial content (apart from advertising matter, which is regarded as commercial propaganda,) is likely to be more oriented to amusement and entertainment (escapism), more superficial, undemanding and conformist, more derivative and standardized (McQuail, 1996, 106). In spite of the fact that there are many differentiated markets, these at least are features, which are related to success in large market terms.

Even though commodification tends to be associated with the processes of commercialization and objectification, it is a broader process than commercialization and a specific process of objectification (Mosco, 1996, 144). Commercialization specifically refers to the creation of relationship between an audience and an advertiser. The commercialization of the airwaves, for instance, means the growth of broadcast advertising and the

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development of programming to deliver audiences to advertisers. Commercialization has also been linked to manipulation, consumerism, and lack of integrity and lack of originality and creativity (Blumler, 1991, 1992). Meanwhile, Lukacs (1971) describes the process of objectification or reification whereby the relations between people 'take on the character of a thing and thus acquire a "phantom objectivity".' Commodification, then, is a specific form of objectification whereby the 'thing' that acquires phantom objectivity is a commodity, that is, an object whose value is established in the marketplace.

The theory of commodification arises in Marx's *Grundrisse*, in which he noted that the objects are commodified by acquiring an exchange value, instead of having merely an intrinsic use value. From the perspective of political economists, the process of commodification in communication involves transforming messages, ranging from bits of data to systems of meaningful thought, into marketable products. Consequently, communication is taken to be a special and particularly powerful commodity because, in addition to its ability to produce surplus value, it contains symbols and images whose meaning helps to shape consciousness. Similarly, cultural products (in the form of images, ideas and symbols) are produced and sold in media markets as commodities. The theory of commodification applies particularly well to the interpretation of commercial advertising (Williamson, 1978), but it has a wider reference. In general, the more art and culture are commodified, the more they lose any critical potential, and intrinsic value distinctions are replaced by or equated with market criteria of cost and demand. 'Commodification' in relation to culture implies that something is taken away from people by the commercial 'consciousness industry' and then sold back to them.

Tehrani explains the phenomena of the decline of public broadcasting and the rise of privatized entertainment to three interlocking processes of commodification of information, which comprises information senders, receivers, and contents (1990, 167). The commodification of information senders is manifested by the change in emphasis from public to commercial broadcasting systems the world over and an attendant process of commodification of public figures (politicians, academics, musicians, etc.) into "stars" to be discovered, commercialized, packaged, and sold to the consumer public (1990, 167). According to him, the principles of the "star system" developed by Hollywood for the promotion of its film productions has now been extended to virtually every field of human enterprise, from music (Michael Jackson, Madonna), to science (Carl Sagan), to newscasts (Dan Rather), to sports (Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods) to best-selling authors (Clavell and Michener), in order to promote particular brands.

Dallas Smythe, among others, since the 1970s has acknowledged the commodification of information receivers. Smythe (1977) advanced Garnham's (1977) two central dimensions of media commodification, that is the direct production of media products and the use of media advertising to perfect the process of commodification in the entire economy. He made the assertion that the audience is the main commodity of the mass media by the practice of "selling" the audiences rather than advertising time to the commercial advertisers.

According to him, the media commodification process linked the media, audiences, and advertisers in a set of binding reciprocal relationships. Mass media programming is used to construct audiences; advertisers pay media companies for access to these audiences; audiences are thereby delivered to advertisers. Thus, the media industries are fully integrated into the capitalist economy via the process of media commodification not essentially by generating ideologically saturated products but by producing audiences, in large numbers and in specific demographically desirable forms, for advertisers.

The commodification of audiences took a fresh and unexpected course with the advent of new communication and information services, especially the teletext and videotext. Qube of Ohio invented *infomercial*, a new category of commercial, which had profound ramifications for the traditional boundaries between programs and commercials, news and editorials, documentaries and promotional (Tehrani, 1990, 169). A Qube interview program known as "Columbus Alive" was in fact a lengthy, camouflaged commercial. Interviews with personalities were paid by corporate sponsors to promote their products but the programs were in no way identified as such (Wicklein, 1981, 22).

The third process of commodification of information content might possibly be regarded as the most extensive outcome of the current information revolution (Tehrani, 1990, 169). What is taking place right now is the gradual incorporation of the public domain information into commercial databases and value-added networks that operate in the commercial information markets. Once this process is completed, the economically disadvantaged groups will be practically priced out of the information marketplace.

### TV GENRES, NEW MEDIA SERVICES, AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF AUDIENCES

In this section, I will focus on the new and dramatic turn in the process of commodification of audiences with the arrival of new media services in the local broadcast industry. In relation to that, the current practice of blurring the boundaries between generic categories, via *infomercial* and *infotainment*, in television programming and scheduling will also be examined and discussed.

Before I embark on the discussion of new television genres spawned by increasing commercialization and commodification of audiences, I will trace the traditional distinctions in television genres in brief. Television programs apparently fall into clear generic categories of news, current affairs, magazines, documentaries, dramas (including soap operas), situation comedies, music and variety shows, sports, children, cartoons, quiz and game shows. Shows are conventionally marketed to networks and advertisers, and presented to reviewers and the public, as new inflections of a popular genre. Examples of new inflections of popular genres are the morning or breakfast "informative" shows, the music video and the new talk shows. Genre serves the dual needs of a commodity: on the one hand standardization and familiarity, and on the other, product differentiation.

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The scheduling practice of blending genres by conventional television has been described by Fiske (1987, 112) as a market-driven motive to predict and produce popularity. By a careful mix of genres – news, soap opera, cop shows, and sitcoms – the scheduler hopes to build a maximum number of audience and the right mix of social groups for the network or channel to sell to the advertisers. He also attributes the blurring of genre boundaries between fiction, fact, and advertisement to postmodernism which refuses neat generic differences (1987, 254). Thus, in music video, one cannot distinguish between ads and programs, and in cop shows like *Miami Vice*, one can see the combination of narrative, commercial, music video and fashion parade. As Wollen (1986) indicates, music video is a special mix of ad and program, for the visuals act as an ad whereas the sound track is a sample of the commodity. Indeed, Livingstone and Lunt (1994, 179) have also detected the combination of the game shows and current affairs programming in the talk shows genre.

Meanwhile, postfordism has been said to mark the end of the era of mass production of homogenized products and the beginning of a new era of batched production of differentiated products to meet the changing tastes and demands of differentiated consumer markets (Tehrani, 1990, 165). This is parallel to what has taken place in the media industry where mass audiences and mass programs are taken over by differentiated audiences and programs. The eventual eclipse of terrestrial or conventional television with its mass programs that cater to mass audiences by subscription and satellite television with their differentiated programs and audiences demonstrates this phenomenon. These new media services have also introduced the concepts of “narrowcasting” to replace broadcasting and “niche marketing” to supplant mass marketing in the context of the local broadcasting industry. However, the new differentiated communication marketplace and the new differentiated communication products will cater to those who have the ability to pay.<sup>1</sup>

New media services in the forms of pay or subscription TV and satellite broadcast appeared on the Malaysian broadcast scene when MegaTV was launched on September 1 1995 and All Asia Satellite Television and Radio Company (ASTRO) a year later on October 1 1996. MegaTV provides a package of five foreign channels, namely America’s Sports Channel (ESPN), the Discovery Channel, Turner Broadcasting’s Cable News Network International (CNNI) and cartoon network as well as Time Warner’s Home Box Office (HBO) movie channel. While ASTRO, Malaysia’s direct-to-user digital broadcast service, offers 22 TV channels which includes local language channels such as Ria, Wah Lai Toi and Vaanavil.

The increase in the number of channels available on the broadcasting scene not only exacerbated the problem of adequate supply of local programming but also the cost of producing and purchasing such programs. In the last couple of years, TV3 has managed to cut down on program cost by producing more “live” (instead of recorded in-house) programs that do not require taping, editing and paid professional talent. Some examples of these shows are the breakfast programs (*Malaysia Hari Ini - MHI - or Malaysia Today*),

women programs (*Wanita Hari Ini* or Today's Women and *Nona* or Mademoiselle), talk shows (*Face to Face* and *Hati ke Hati Bersama Farah*), talent shows (*Sinaran Pasport Kegemilangan* or Passport to Fame and Stardom) and quiz shows (such as *Panjang Akal* or IQ in MHI) which involve the participation of audiences, amateurs and guest experts on topics ranging from health to law to education to business.

With Mega TV (owned and operated by its subsidiary company, Cableview Services Sdn.Bhd.) providing four channels of news, documentaries, sports and movies round the clock and 20 hours of cartoons and variety a day, TV3 has changed its program concept from emphasis on entertainment and current news (its motto *being Berita Terkini, Hiburan Sensasi* or Latest News, Sensational Entertainment) to "information" and "education". Hence, the scheduling of the "informative" breakfast show, *MHI*, from 7:30 to 10:30 AM every morning of the week, a general knowledge quiz show (*Panjang Akal*) or a forum on study skills (*Bijak Belajar*) from 10:30 to 11:30 AM as well as discussion shows such as *Editor* and *Face to Face* from 11:30 AM to 12:30 PM.

With the increase in broadcast hours, broadcasters are compelled to include the public/ audience not only in talent, quiz and game shows as well as the discussion and the new talk shows (which invite call-ins from home viewers) but also in the various segments of the breakfast shows. Examples of the more popular segments on *MHI* where the audience or public are incorporated as active participants are *Jejak Kasih* (Tracking Loved Ones) and *Cermin Diri* (Self-Reflection). *Jejak Kasih* is an excellent example of a combination of public service announcement and melodrama in the search for, and the successful reunion of, long-lost family members. Meanwhile, the roadshows of *Cermin Diri* featuring Dr. Fadzillah Khamsah, an associate professor in development communication turn motivational expert, involves the crowds of loyal fans/audiences in different states of Malaysia in an intense self-help, self-improvement, group counseling session rolled-in-one. These more popular segments are then packaged as other forms of merchandise, such as books, audio and videotapes, and sold at the souvenir shop in the studio complex.

Direct selling by television and talk/direct access phone-in formats are part and parcel of the latest wave of commercialization. According to Sardar and Davies, direct selling via television as demonstrated by *Smart Shop*, *TV Innovations* and *Kayla Beverly Hills Showcase*, "dilutes and debases the entire medium of communication by purporting to utilize well established, familiar documentary techniques solely on behalf of promoting a particular product" (1997, 5). The authors also argue that call-ins by home viewers via discussion or talk shows is "maximizing the use of high cost infrastructure at least expense. High technology, high cost studios, with minimal outlay become blocked off for instant transmission time" (Sardar and Davies, 1997, 7).

Apart from overt forms of merchandising, the boundaries between advertising and programming content are further blurred by other program formats like science and technology time fillers such as *Infosains*. On many instances, one can find a focus on science item in a news broadcast, magazine or documentary, that is nothing more than an

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infotainment commercial for some item of computer software. Sardar and Davies (1997, 8) point out to another trend in local programming, namely a vast increase in 'eco fillers', documentaries on the environment and promotional items between programs comparable to commercials for the wonders of Nature.

The routine of inviting guests who promote certain products or services in certain segments of the morning shows is another obvious example where there is no clear distinction between programming content and advertising content. The appearance of promoters for diet formulas in the segment on health and nutrition on the morning shows is one instance. The Women/Family Development programs (*Nona, Wanita Hari Ini, Hias Rumah, Imej*), the Music Chart Shows and programs on the entertainment industry (like *Melodi, Skrin* and *Rentak Karya*) are notorious for unabashedly promoting personal care, fashion, cosmetic, home furnishing, and entertainment products and services as part of the programming content. Even children and youth or teen programs are guilty of marketing commercial recreational activities or pursuits.

Game and quiz shows also provide the cheapest option to television commercial for advertisers and one that has the added bonus of presenting them as "sponsors" rather than "advertisers". These shows are often accused of encouraging materialism and of constructing the viewer as a consumer by glamorizing the prizes and capturing the ecstatic excitement of the winners and the studio audiences (Fiske, 1987, 271). Like advertising, quiz shows are obviously part of commodity capitalism, and use many of the similar cultural strategies. For example, the use of attractive models to display the prizes and therefore associate commodities with sexuality, hence linking buying with sexual desire and satisfaction (Fiske, 1987, 272).

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have attempted to analyze the interplay between the advent of new media services, namely subscription and satellite television, and the adjustments made by conventional terrestrial television to adapt to the processes of increased commercialization and commodification in the new broadcast environment.

As I have mentioned in the introduction, the changes in financial bases with the introduction of privatization and deregulation of the national television system have produced the commercialization and commodification of television content and its audience. Funding from advertising and commercial sponsorship has shifted the orientation in programming towards entertainment and the constitution of the audience from public to consumers as well as a pool of cheap cultural workers or 'talents'.

The ethos of infotainment and infomercial prevails, and yet there are no apparent alternatives to counteract these blatant commercial tendencies. Sardar and Davies (1997, 7) trace a direct link between this ethos to the decline and decadence of the American culture of broadcasting, a culture that in fact had no discernable 'golden age'. However, in the

United States, this culture of broadcasting is contested, debated and lamented, albeit to very little effect, because access to alternative discourses are available, for example Public Broadcasting Services (PBS). The ascendancy of the commercial ethos are clearly countervailed and recognized even at the inferior end of broadcasting itself because they are a cultural force. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the Malaysian broadcasting culture.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Other than Pay TV channels, new opportunities for broadcasters to diversify their income sources include Video on Demand services, namely Pay per View services, as well as telemusic, programs/information access via remote terminals, programs on line and programs in CD ROMs.

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