

Consumers, Citizens and Copycat Television in Malaysia

Wang Lay Kim¹

In the 1970's, the governments of many developing countries, including Malaysia, have voiced their concern and anxiety over the influence of the media on the supposed cultural identity of their countries. There was a widely held perception that transnational media have a negative influence on the cultural identity of these developing countries.

These concerns resulted in a study carried out by a UNESCO commission, headed by Sean MacBride, to look into the problem of imbalance flow of information from the core (developed nations) to the periphery (developing nations), and also to provide possible solutions to redress the inequities in the distribution and control of global communication resources. With increasing trends in globalisation and rapid development of communication technology, foreign programmes are even more freely available both on terrestrial and satellite television. Malaysia has since responded by stipulating different policies on television programming.

While we are still grappling with the imbalance in the flow of information, an added aspect of this imbalance is one that is not confined just to imported programmes but format adapted programmes that have proliferated on Malaysian television schedule. Programmes from the USA and Britain such as popular quiz shows like *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, *Wheels of Fortune*, *Survivor*, *American Idol* have been copied and adapted albeit with local casts in Malaysian television programmes.

It is in this context that this paper will explore firstly the current traffic of format adapted programmes on Malaysian television; secondly what constraints including state (guidelines and policies promulgated by the government), and economics of program production (audience ratings and targets the financial managers expect) have on format adapted programmes in particular and on Malaysian television broadcasting in general; and thirdly, its impact on consumers and their perception to format adapted programmes. This pilot quantitative study of the flow of format adapted programme would allow us to monitor in the future any such flow and assess its impact on the broadcasting industry here.

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Malaysian television and its development

Malaysia is getting a liberal dose of foreign programmes due to the increasing trend in globalisation in communication as well as Malaysia's own policy to deregulate and open up the skies to satellite television that increased the number of channels of television. Globalisation process is lauded by developed nations, specifically the USA, for promising heterogeneity in terms of cultural products and diversity in voices, images and opinions through the free market. The developed nations insisted on a free flow of information. However critiques of the free market and free flow of information are sceptical as to whether public interest, heterogeneity, diversity was upper most in the minds of liberal advocates of globalisation. Schiller (2001:325) has pointed out that cultural products from the developed nations needed free access into markets and the insistence on a free flow of information is more to ensure that the developed world have easy access to sell their media products to a rapidly expanding television market in the developing world that has an estimated three billion viewers. It is little wonder that developed nations such as America and Britain withdrew in 1984 from UNESCO who supported the developing nations' call for a New World Information Communication Order (NWICO).

While the developing nations called for a balanced flow of information outside its boundaries to prevent further erosion of national sovereignty and cultural identities, through regulations; within nation state, ruling elites have asserted their control in almost every aspect of modern life including the media. This is true of broadcasting in Malaysia that has been controlled through ownership and government legislation (see Zaharom 1991,2002 & Wang Lay Kim 2001). Again this control cannot by any stretch of imagination be construed as protection of cultural identities and public interest either as control such as those through ownership of the media also limits diversity of voices and choices for the people.

Malaysia's first two television stations were introduced in the 1960s with TV1 and TV 2, both of whom are state owned stations. After more than twenty years later, the first commercial television, TV3, was introduced in 1984. TV3 was initially owned by Fleet Group, the investment arm of UMNOⁱ. The shareholding structure was changed in tandem with changes in political leadership, where Malaysian Resources Corporation BHD (MRCB), a listed company controlled by businessmen with close links with the government (see Gomez 1994:136) took over the station. Ownership of TV3 was altered again when MRCB was restructured to get it out of its financial malaise after the 1997 economic crisis which affected the Asian region (The Star, 11 January 2003). Media Prima took over 100% equity interest in TV3. Coincidentally or strategically, this restructuring took place just before Abdullah Badawi took over as premier of the country. The Prime Minister's former press secretary, Kamarulzaman was appointed the Executive Director (see Zaharom and Wang 2004).

Then in November 2003, Media Prima acquired 80% stake in Metropolitan TV Sdn Bhd which was closed down during the 1997 economic crisis and with the acquisition Metro TV was re-launched as 8TV. In essence, Media Prima now owns 100 percent of TV3, 80 percent interest in Metropolitan TV and a 43 percent stake in New Straits Times Press (NSTP), making it Malaysia's largest listed media company. This is construed as a domination of broadcasting industry.

Ntv7, was launched in April 1997, with Mohd Effendi Norwawi as the chairman. Effendi had served as managing director in the Sarawak State Economic Development Corporation (SSEDC) and is a loyalist to the ruling coalition (Sally Cheong: 1993: 57). He was also the Minister of Agriculture from 1999 up till 2004.

Another private television station is Channel 9 which commenced telecast on September 2003 is owned by Tan Sri Rashid Manaf through Anaza Sdn Bhd (51%) and Datuk Muhammad Mustafa (49%), Datuk Muhammad Mustafa was the former chairman of Medanmas Sdn Bhd, that had a 10% share in Metropolitan Television (Utusan Malaysia, 13 June 2004).

Satellite television, ASTRO (All Asia Television and Radio Company) introduced in 1996, was made possible by the launch of MEASAT (Malaysian East Satellite System). MEASAT is owned by Binariang who in turn is owned by Ananda Krishnan. Salazar (2004:206) pointed out that Ananda, like other beneficiaries of state patronage had built bridges with powerful politicians (like the former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad) who were in the position to hand out licences and contracts. Although the idea of open skies was earlier rejected by the Ministry of Information, the push for the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) as well as deregulation have opened up the skies albeit with a 60 centimetre satellite dish. Control of the media through owners connected to powerful ruling elites further ensures the ruling elites get the support of the media. ASTRO, a subscription based service provides over 30 channels featuring Western, Asian and local programmes.

Policies and guidelines

In the cultural sphere, the government often determines and charts policies for both state owned television stations as well as private stations. It is stipulated that local programmes should reflect multi racial composition of the population, observe the constitutional provision that Islam is the official religion and be consistent with government policy; and should not portray any race in a bad light and offend any religious groups.

However, in an interview with a TV1 personnel who wants to remain anonymous, it was pointed out that some of these stipulations are very arbitrary and given at the discretion of the Minister of Information. She illustrated for example that a former Information Minister, insisted that news reader don the *baju Melayu* to project

cultural identity much to the disapproval of professional producers because it undermines artistic purpose and integrity of the programme. However, this guideline was quickly changed when the Deputy Prime Minister's wife at an official function commented on the inappropriateness of the attire of news readers on TV1.

Among other guidelines provided by the Ministry of Information is the restriction on violence, horror, sex and counter culture (VHSC) on television. To execute these guidelines, all programmes aired on television have to undergo review by a Censorship Board. This censorship can be carried overboard. In interview with the same personnel, it was revealed that at one time the Board decided that *Ghostbusters* and *Superman* had to be taken off the air because they carried elements of 'horror'. Another children's action programme, *The Morphin' Power Rangers*, was ordered off the screen because the Board understood the word "morphin" to mean drugs and therefore seen as 'counter culture'.

Another guideline stipulated by the Ministry, supposedly to protect the young and vulnerable is the mandatory classification of all television programmes and films before airing it to the public. All programmes classified as suitable for those over 18 years old could only be aired after 10 pm.

Paternalistic attitude and conservative policies of the Ministry of Information to guide local producers to incorporate, reflect and support government views in their production continues to curb the right of citizens to full membership of social and cultural formation.

On the other hand, private television's all encompassing guideline and policy is to maximize the number of right audience in order to increase the advertising dollars. This in turn dictates the kind of programmes aired. This is consistent with what was postulated by Golding and Murdock (1991:20) that:

"The economics of commercial broadcasting revolves around the exchange of audiences for advertising revenue. The price that corporations pay for advertising spots on particular programmes is determined by the size and social composition of the audience it attracts. And in prime time, the premium prices are commanded by shows that can attract and hold the greatest number of viewers and provide a symbolic environment in tune with consumption. The needs inevitably tilt programming towards familiar and well tested formulae and formats and away from risk and innovation, and anchor it in common-sense rather than alternative viewpoints."

To maximise on the profit taking many television stations aired cheaper imported programmes, and developed separate “belts” to attract the right audience for the advertisers. TV3 for example introduced the ‘Chinese Belt’ that brought series of Chinese dramas imported from Hong Kong and Taiwan, every evening to its audience. This was followed suit by other television stations to increase their audience share.

Locally produced or format adapted?

Most of these programmes aired, Karthigesu (1994:75-76) points out, are mainly well tested entertainment programmes that could draw a large audience. Even government owned TV 1 and TV2, has now given more attention to its programming in order to be more competitive in drawing advertising revenue. This development has raised concerns about programmes imported from the West and its influence on the people here. As a result the government has stipulated a quota of 80% local content for all television stations both government-owned and commercial.

However, a quantitative analysis of television programmes shows that television stations have yet to reach the government set quota. As reflected in Table 1 the local content constituted 60%, whereas foreign programmes made up 40% of air time. Although it seems that the percentage of number of local programmes is higher, in terms of broadcast hours, more hours are allocated to foreign programmes which is 65872 minutes which constitute 53 % of total broadcast hours. This is because most foreign programmes such as films, animated cartoons and dramas have longer broadcast hours.

Table 1
Locally produced content on Malaysian television
March 2002

Channel	Total output broadcast		Locally produced content		Percentages of locally produced content	
	Number	Hours (min)	Number	Hours (min)	Number	Hours
TV1	839	33312	750	29407	89	88
TV2	695	26312	372	9210	54	35
TV3	917	33925	510	14736	56	43
NTV7	660	30440	224	4764	34	16
Total	3111	123989	1856	58117	60	47

Among the four TV channels studied, the quantitative data shows that TV1 has the most locally produced programmes with 750 out of 839 of total output broadcast. This is possibly due to the broadcast of morning breakfast talk show *Selamat Pagi Malaysia* (Good Morning Malaysia) which has a four hour broadcast time daily. TV3

allocated almost equal number of local and foreign programmes with 56 % for local programmes. However, in terms of broadcast hours foreign programmes made up 19189 minutes while 14736 minutes of total broadcast hours was allocated to local programmes.

The same pattern can be seen in TV2 and NTV7. TV2 for example allocated only 372 local programmes against 695 of total output broadcast. NTV7 allocated 224 local programmes as against 660 programmes of total output broadcast. Most of these imported programmes are films and dramas brought in from Western countries or from Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and India. A large amount of foreign programmes are used because they cost less. For example, Japanese serial dramas are acquired for US\$1,100 per episode hour while locally produced ones can cost eight to nine times more. American programmes cost slightly more than Japanese ones, starting at US\$1500 per episode hour (Interview with Zohara Bathusha, Vice President Content Acquisition, Ntv7).

Looking at the weekly pattern, the same trend can be seen. TV1 and TV3 broadcast more local programmes with fewer broadcast hours in comparison to the foreign imports. Most channels are quite consistent with this pattern except for NTV7 which showed an increase in its local programmes over the week, from 55 programmes in week one to 161 programmes in the last week of March, 2002.

Although NTV7 increased the number of its local programmes, the broadcast hours of its imported programmes remained higher than the broadcast hours of its local programmes. For example, in week one, 988 hours were given to local programmes in comparison to 7610 of total broadcast hours. In week four, the hours increased to 1238 and this is still falls far short of the 80% quota.

Table 2
The weekly total output broadcast and total of locally produced content of Malaysian television for the month of March 2002.

(a) Week 1

Channel	Total output broadcast		Locally produced content		Percentages	
	Number	Hours (min)	Number	Hours (min)	Number	Hours
TV1	192	8182	173	7335	90.10	89.64
TV2	177	6377	94	2284	53.10	35.81
TV3	226	8510	125	3660	55.30	43.00
NTV7	165	7610	55	988	33.30	12.98
Total	760	30679	447	14267	58.81	46.51

(b) Week 2

Channel	Total output broadcast		Locally produced content		Percentages	
	Number	Hours (min)	Number	Hours (min)	Number	Hours
TV1	200	8665	181	7617	90.5	87.90
TV2	164	6645	92	2309	56.09	34.74
TV3	231	8520	129	3758	55.84	44.10
NTV7	165	7610	57	1394	34.54	18.31
Total	760	31440	459	15078	60.39	47.95

(c) Week 3

Channel	Total output broadcast		Locally produced content		Percentages	
	Number	Hours (min)	Number	Hours (min)	Number	Hours
TV1	236	8545	210	7435	88.98	87.00
TV2	177	6645	93	2309	52.54	34.74
TV3	231	8450	129	3678	55.84	43.52
NTV7	202	7194	75	1292	37.12	17.95
	846	30834	507	14714	59.92	47.72

(d) (Week 4)

Channel	Total output broadcast		Locally produced content		Percentages of locally produced content	
	Number	Hours (min)	Number	Hours (min)	Number	Hours
TV1	211	7920	186	7020	88.15	88.63
TV2	177	6645	93	2308	52.54	34.73
TV3	229	8445	127	3640	55.45	43.10
NTV7	177	7485	161	1238	34.46	16.53
	794	30495	567	14206	71.41	46.58

As for satellite television, ASTRO, to all intents and purposes was set up with the aspiration to provide an Asian alternative to western programmes. However, due to a lack of a big library of local programmes, it still has to resort to foreign programmes. An analysis of programmes provided by the Astro Ria a locally packaged channel for the month of March, 2002, revealed that although 70% of the content is local, many programmes like game shows and dramas are direct copies of American programmes and the same programmes are repeated throughout the month of analysis to fill airtime and foreign programmes are provided but using a dual sound track to allow audience receive the programme in the English or Malay Language. This has somehow impaired the real essence of the policy of 80% local content stipulated by the Ministry of Information.

Apart from foreign programmes being imported and aired on Malaysian television, an emerging trend is format adaptation of foreign programmes. Format adapted (FA) programmes refer to programmes that are successfully used in one market and adapted in another market usually through licensing. Format adaptation is increasingly noticeable on Malaysian television stations although this is not a new phenomenon and invariably as television stations become more competitive, they tend to clone favourite and popular programmes from other stations.

In mapping the trend of format adaptation, programmes that have been cloned or copied include talk shows, music videos, magazine shows, home decoration programmes, comedy drama, police drama, sitcom, children's programme and game shows. In the case of game shows the format is usually fully adapted through licensing of the programme. Talk shows on the other hand adapts the general format but with the local flavour. The three talk shows - *Selamat Pagi Malaysia*, *Malaysia Hari Ini* and *Money Matter* - on television are similar in format to morning breakfast shows shown in the west. Music videos such as *Malaysia Top 20* (in English), *Anugerah Juara Lagu* (in Malay), *20 Chang Xiao Bang* (in Chinese) and *Padam*

Padhal Putir (in Tami) are adapted from popular MTV or UK Top 20 music programmes. The only difference is that it adapted the programme to the local language and ethnic groups' taste using mostly albums and songs from Hong Kong, Taiwan and India.

Children's programmes are also frequently cloned. Most children's programmes adapt Sesame Street's format. Out of 30 format adapted programmes identified, 5 or 17% programmes are children's programme with a total broadcast time of 173 minutes or 7% of the total broadcast hours (Table 3).

Four game shows that were shown on Malaysian TV took up 184 minutes or 7 % of the total broadcast hours of format adapted based programmes. Two of the locally adapted game shows, *Siapa Nak Jadi jutawan* (Who Wants to be a Millionaire) and *Roda Impian* (Wheel of Fortune) were licensed and adapted into the national language, but with a setting just like the original programme.

Other genre such as magazine, sitcom, police drama and home decoration are also adapted on Malaysian television. Police drama such as *Roda-Roda Kotaraya* was a clone of 'Chips' and it became the standard for two other police drama *Gerak Khas* and *Skwad Elite*, the latter being a carbon copy of SWAT, a popular police serial shown in the late 70's. Local situation comedies like *Kelas Malam* and *2+1.com.my* are copies of *Mind Your Language* and *Three's Company*. Another comedy shown on TV3, *Getting Together* is about a group of friends hanging around together discussing relationships, career and daily routines in their lives, is akin to six friends in an American sitcom, *Friends*. Other genres like news, cooking programmes, drama, and soap opera have been well adapted into the local television culture.

Almost all cloned programmes are unlicensed with the exception of the game shows. In the analysis, it is possible for the researcher and the audience to recognize that the programmes were adapted although they were indigenised. All format adapted programmes that are indigenized are considered local and therefore illusively accounted in the 80% local content definition.

Table 3
FA programmes in genres in one week in March 2002

<i>Genre</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Hours (min)</i>	<i>Percentages</i>
Talk Show	3	1550	10
Music video	7	270	23
Home deco	1	30	3
Magazine	3	120	10
Cooking programme	1	28	3
Comedy Drama	1	30	3
Police drama	2	120	7
Sitcom	3	86	10
Children's programme	5	173	17
Game Show	4	184	13

Table 4
FA programmes against total domestic output for the month of March 2002.

<i>Channel</i>	<i>Total domestic output</i>		<i>FA programme</i>		<i>Percentages of FA programmes</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Hours (min)</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Hours (min)</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Hours</i>
TV1	734	29407	65	6158	9	21
TV2	357	9210	8	256	2	3
TV3	510	14706	90	4024	18	27
NTV7	21	870	8	360	38	41
Total	1622	54193	171	10798	11	20

Although the number of adapted programmes seems to make up a small amount of broadcast hours in all the televisions channels, (See Table 4), in terms of hours, the amount of format adapted programmes make up 10798 minutes or 20% of total domestic broadcast hours. In other words in terms of accounting for local content, local original programmes shown on television stations fall far short of the 80% local content mark.

From Table 5 & 6, most of the adapted programmes are copies or clones from the USA. Out of the 30 format adapted programmes identified in the period of study, 16 or 55% are adapted from the US based programmes. In terms of broadcast hours, these programmes total up to 2049 hours or 80% or the total hours of FA based programmes. There are only five UK based programmes being adapted on Malaysian TV and the most popular ones are game shows such as Who Wants To Be A

Millionaire and Family Fortune. Apart from the UK and the US based programmes, Malaysian TV also adapts programmes from other parts of the world such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea and Canada.

Table 5
FA programme and its origin
March 2002

Malaysian programme	Foreign programme/ Country of origin	Genre	Channel	Status
Majalah 3	Unknown	Magazine	TV3	Unlicensed
City Focus	Focus on Focus (HK)	Magazine	TV2	Unlicensed
999	Crime Watch (UK)	Magazine	TV3	Unlicensed
Selamat Pagi Malaysia	Good Morning America (US)	Talk Show	TV1	Unlicensed
Malaysia Hari Ini	Good Morning America (US)	Talk Show	TV3	Unlicensed
Money Matters	Unknown	Talk Show	TV3	Unlicensed
Muzik TV	MTV (US)	Music Video	TV1	Unlicensed
Malaysia Top 20	UK Top 20 (UK)	Music Video/Chart show	TV3	Unlicensed
20 Chang Xiao Bang	MTV + UK Top 20	Music Video	TV3	Unlicensed
Bollywood.com	MTV (US)	Music Video	TV3	Unlicensed
Padam Padhal Puthir	MTV (US)	Music video/chart show	TV3	Unlicensed
V-Pop	MTV (US)	Music Video	TV3	Unlicensed
Now Showing.... In the Nimisham	Cinema Cinema (US)		TV3	Unlicensed
Kelas Malam	Mind Your Language (UK)	Sitcom	TV1	Unlicensed
Spanar Jaya	Brotherly Love (US)	Sitcom	NTV7	Unlicensed
2+1.com.my	Three's Company (US)	Sitcom	TV3	Unlicensed
Kidtun	Sesame Street (US)	Kid's programme	TV1	Unlicensed
Simon and Siga	Sesame Street (US)	Kid's programme	TV1	Unlicensed
Super Sustagen Kidz Challenge	Unknown	Kid's programme	TV3	Unlicensed
Kelab Disney Malaysia	Unknown (US)	Kid's programme	TV3	Endorsed by Disney
Tommy and Oscar Interactive Game	Tommy and Oscar (US)	Kid's programme	NTV7	Unlicensed
Chinese Game Show	Unknown	Game show	TV2	Unlicensed
Famili Ceria	Family Fortune (UK)	Game Show	NTV7	Unlicensed
Who Wants to be a Millionaire	Who wants to be a millionaire (UK)	Game Show	NTV7	Licensed
Roda Impian	Wheel of Fortune (US)	Game Show	TV3	Licensed
Seri	Unknown	House Deco	TV1	Unlicensed
Mmm... sedapnya Ayam	Unknown	Unknown	TV3	Unlicensed
Getting Together	Friends (US)	Comedy Drama	TV3	Unlicensed
Gerak Khas	Unknown	Police Drama	TV1	Unlicensed
Skuad Elit	SWAT (US)	Police Drama	TV1	Unlicensed

Table 6
National origins of FA programmes
March 2002

Origin	Number	Hours (min)	Percentages	
			Number	Hours
USA	16	2049	55	80
UK	5	240	17	9
HK	2	64	7	3
Canada	1	30	4	1
Unknown	6	178	17	7
Total	30	2561	100	100

The empirical data confirms Schiller's scepticism of pluralist views that cultural domination no longer exists in a globalised world. He argued that *"American cultural domination remains forceful in a rapidly changing international power scene. It is undergoing transformation. This occurs by acquisition and, more importantly by its practices being adopted by the rest of the transnational corporate system. What is emerging, therefore, is a world where alongside the American output of cultural product are the practically identical items marketed by competing national and transnational groups."* (Schiller 2001:327)

Although on the surface, television programmes on Malaysian television looks local enough after the copy is indigenized, the majority of the programmes nonetheless originate mainly from USA or UK. These programmes are produced by a small group of transnationals having the oligopolistic control to advertise and sell their products here or elsewhere. Audience are hence marketed as potential consumers to the advertisers. Just as Birch (1998:6) aptly points out, in Asia, globalisation in the context of communication is a mode of management which is linked to business and capital and that communication is assigned an economic value which is owned, traded and managed by a corporation or government or both and in the drive for private gain, invariably real diversity and difference are eradicated.

From the empirical evidence, Government policies such as the 80% local content are meaningless and impotent in generating a vibrant broadcasting industry that provides for cultural diversity. On the other hand private television stations' bottom line logic results in adhering to familiar, tried and tested formulae and formats which would not provide the audience what they want but rather what the market both the international and the national determines.

Interviews with broadcasters from TV3 and Ntv7 reveals that they do not have any real policies with regards format adaptation nor increasing the local content. They air the most popular genre and programmes that can draw in advertisers and profit. There are no guidelines as to the quota or percentage of programme to clone or to copy. So

long as they don't contravene Copyrights Act and the ideas and formats are popular they have been adapted into local programmes.

These television stations also buy programmes from production houses to supplement the station's needs. Ntv7 for example supplements its schedule with local programmes produced by KZR, a production house, closely affiliated to the station through ownership. KZR, run by Ellyna Affendi, daughter of the owner of Ntv7, supplies Ntv7 with some of its programmes. However, according to Ntv7's Content Acquisition Vice President, Zohara Bathusha, meeting the demands of television stations is an enormous task because the cost of producing local programmes like drama is high and stations are only willing to pay a certain amount on local programmes. TV3, for example is willing to pay a maximum of RM80, 000 for a 90 minute drama. In order increase production and at the same time cut cost to meet stations' demands, ideas are copied and poor production techniques are used resulting in poor quality programmes.

Millionaire economics

Although television stations generally depend on audience ratings, sometimes even popular programmes are not guaranteed an eternal presence especially if they are not raking in the profit. One example is the game show "*Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*". According to Zohara, *Millionaire*, a licensed programme from Celador, UK, had a 12 TVR which was about one million viewers at its peak. There were 20 episodes per season and each episode costs US5,500. Apart from that, out of the total budget for *Millionaire*, 20% goes to license fee and the other 70% goes to prize money. The prize money was provided by the television station that is Ntv7. She reveals that it is not cheaper to use licensed programme, however, these programmes are picked because they are popular and well received in the country of origin or elsewhere.

One of the reason, television stations buys the format or license is because the production manual and consultants are provided to train the local crew. Technicians are sent to learn how to construct their own set here. There are opportunities to learn from the experts and at the very least the station feels that the quality of the programme and the ratings are assured even though the cost is high. However, since the station has to bear the prize money, the burden became too great and unprofitable. And in a country where the population is not big enough to rake in huge profit from phone calls, the rate of profitability drops. Profit from phone-ins are distributed in the proportion of 40% to government and 60% to the phone company which is split with the television station 40% and 60% respectively.

In the case of the Chinese version of *Millionaire* the problem is twofold; firstly it was not making money and participants also fail to answer very simple questions which caused audience to lose interests and caused a drop in the audience rating. As a result

Millionaire was later shown only during festive seasons like Hari Raya (Muslim celebration) and Christmas.

Ntv7 also pointed out that interference and guidelines from the Ministry of Information while scheduling had caused inconveniences for the station. For example, *Millionaire* was initially aired at 8 pm, which was the time that TV3 slots its news bulletin. After complaints from TV3, the Ministry stipulated that news programme ought to be aired between 7 pm to 9 pm; hence *Millionaire* was moved to another slot. This interruption has implications on audience rating too.

Interviews with producers of licensed game shows also reveal that while there are plus points to licensed programme adaptation, nonetheless, the set back is that game shows that are workable elsewhere may not work out here. In the case of another game show, *Celebrity Squares*, the attraction is the celebrity and if he/she doesn't carry the programme well, audience are not captivated by it. There is also the added disadvantage in terms of the perception of audience, who interpret copycat programmes as lacking in creativity and originality on the part of producers.

Another problem faced by producers is that there is little allocation for research and development to improve on the quality of local programmes let alone long term planning of a more vibrant programming for the broadcast industry. Profitability is always prioritized. Although audience perceive the lack of creativity and originality of production, original local game shows have been produced before. For example *Pintar Pintas* and *Get Set Go* were produced by Articulate TV for TV1 had won the Asia TV Awards in Singapore. Although these productions received much help from a Dutch director, good local production are seldom marketed to other countries because of a lack of adequate patenting process and good marketing networks outside the country. This lack hinders growth of a vibrant industry beyond our shores. Nonetheless some locally produced programmes such as *Spanar Jaya* which is the local version of Home Improvement has been sold to Brunei.

Consumers or citizens?

The audience study is intended to only skim the surface to get an inkling to the perception of audience towards format adapted programmes. Therefore a non-random sampling of 174 respondents comprising primary and secondary school children, college and university students, working adults and housewives from urban areas in Penang and Ipoh were interviewed either one to one or in groups of 2 to 4 in order to understand audience responses to copycatting of television programmes. The primary division of the groups are according to age 16 and under, 16-23, 23-39, 39-55 and over 55. It is assumed that the first three groups are heavy viewers of television programmes. This part of the research is purposed to illustrate audience perception and understanding of format television specifically and the broadcast industry in

general. The aim here is not to look for representativeness of total audience response to format adaptation.

Interviews to get the responses of audience were at times difficult because of the language problem, for example Chinese speaking housewives were by and large suspicious of interviewers and are reluctant to be interviewed. Translation of answers causes the nuances to be lost. The non English speaking interviewees find it difficult to express in English as a result some of the interviews were conducted in Malay. However, it is still possible to gain an understanding of audience reception and their views of copycat television.

Among the respondents interviewed, there seems to be a general awareness of copycat television among the respondents. This is illustrated by comments from the different groups. A group of 9 year olds when asked about remaking in the area of entertainment said *"many such as books... but I can't give examples..."* The friends added that *"TV programmes a lot... Usop Santorian and Kluangman... Celebrity Squares... Doubledare 2000... Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?"* Another group pointed out that many Chinese dramas were copied. Older students were able to identify more specifically the copycat programs which included game shows like *Wheel of Fortune, Who Wants to be a Millionaire, Celebrity Squares*; police drama, kid shows like *Kids@ntv7* and Chinese drama like *Kei Chi Tong Guai* and Malay dramas like *Saya Tak Bodoh*; music programmes like *RIM* and *Akademi Fantasia*.

One group of university students said *"we seldom watch TV, but almost every programme in local television is copied from other countries, such as Malay drama, game shows."* University students' responses are generally the same. The working adults and housewives identified reality shows like *You Asked For It*; and lifestyle programs like *E-Life with Ai Ling* and *On the Beat* and cookery programmes like *Chef Wan* as copycat programmes.

However there are uncertainties among respondents as to the degree of copycat programmes in other genres. For example one respondent said *"In fact, besides game shows and drama, especially situation comedy, not many other programmes are remade or copied from other countries. Lifestyle programmes like E-Life With Ai Ling also not seem like copycatting, different with other lifestyle programmes from the foreign countries as its content is about local lifestyle."* Presumably this respondent recognized the indigenised culture portrayed in the programme and uncertain whether that it is original or a copy.

Most of the respondents concur that it is easier to adapt game shows, reality shows and scripted programmes. And as to the origin of such copies, the answers range from USA, UK, Taiwan, Korea, Hong Kong, Japan and Taiwan.

As to whether the audiences are aware of the differences in copycat television and the original, most of them pointed out that language, costume, presenter, and location, music, and production had been changed. Others said that there weren't any substantial changes. One group of secondary student pointed out that *"language, settings and decorations are different. Malaysia's decoration and setting are not attractive, looked dull and just repeat the same settings like the original, like Roda Impian (Wheel Of Fortune) and Who Will Win."*

A group of university students pointed out that *"Malaysia's version have lower quality. Host presentation is not so interesting...questions set in the program is not general enough...for example the Chinese won't be able to answer those question regarding the Malay's traditional language."* Another group said *"...some of the style of presentation are different. Malaysian version is more conservative, for example the hosts in musical programs seldom criticize the artist, and they tend to praise them. The questions in local game shows also tend to be safe, as never arise any sensitive issues....the ways actors carry out the character are different in Malaysia compare to the original TV product."*

The working adults are more judicious of the difference. One group said *"the setting, content is different. Those elements tend to follow local culture ...there are not much changes in formatted programme like Millionaire. But for lifestyle program, the local culture that is introduced is unique in Malaysia, like Malay cultural dance, wayang kulit; wau...style of the hosts is not the same. Malaysian hosts looked unnatural and less charming like Victor Gu in Millionaire.... Content is more localized based on local point of view."*

Most of the school children felt that the format adapted programmes are suitable for the local audience because the local language is used and the local setting gives it the *"kampong"* feel and it makes the audience happy and it is nice to watch. However, two groups opined that there is still too much Western influence in the formatted programmes. One respondent said *"sesuai kerana stesen TV mempunyai ratings audiens yang amat tinggi untuk programme format adapted tersebut, lagipun ia merangsang persaingan sengit sesama stesen TV."*(suitable because of the high audiens rating it encourages competition among TV stations.)

The university group, generally say that programmes are suitable. One group pointed out that *"the changes are suitable to the local culture and policy. The program makers have to consider those rules and regulations first before start to shoot any programme. So, the product is mostly suitable to the local audiences and government tastes as it already go through the filter of Kementerian Penapisan dan Penerangan."*

The working adult group's responses are varied. Changes are seen as suitable as it helps audience to accept those programmes easily and the audience said that they like

to watch television programmes that are close to their lifestyle, language and culture. However there are those who say that since the changes are mild, the formatted programmes are suitable for the local audience and it is better to adapt than to make local low quality programmes. There is a general perception that locally made programmes are low in quality and even remade ones are lower in quality than the original.

Primary school children generally feel that it is better not to copy and better to create new ideas. One respondent said *"new idea is better if not the American people know we copy theirs they will get angry"* while another said outside ideas may teach our children to be bad. There is still the idea that western programmes have this effect on defenceless, vulnerable children. Older secondary children feel that we may lose our creativity if we always copy. They feel it is better that we copy the technique and concept but generally not copy everything. One group feels that *"we should have our own innovation so that it is in line with our own cultural identity and norms."* This group also perceives that the reason format adapted programmes are used because local producers are not confident about their production ability, however, producers must be encouraged so that we can have better quality programmes.

On the other hand there is the group which feels that the translated local version is better and more attractive for the local audience and in addition one respondent added *"low budget in Malaysia's TV programme also contribute to the unattractive setting. But, it is suitable for Malaysians because we are already used to watching those programmes. So we will not give attention to the setting."*

As for the university students, responses are varied. Some feel that it is better to use original rather than copies, while there are those who feel that copycatting has its problems. One respondent said *"remade programmes are very common in Malaysia. I feel very disappointed to the continuous remaking programmes of from other countries as it proved that the quality and creativity of local people are very low. It will cause no improvement and development of local broadcasting field, just show that the Malaysians are stupid."*

The housewife group although earlier said that the adaptation is suitable in terms of language and culture, too much copycat television reflect a lack of local talents and may make us lose our identity and creativity. But sometimes a positive effect may come out of it as copying may increase the quality of our programmes. As for the working adults they find copycatting normal. Some groups said *'actually, remaking and copycatting partially is normal, but not copy totally. Before we start to invent anything, we need to follow a model first, just like remake good foreign programmes... remaking has to do wisely, but not follow totally the original programme. If we can see the potential and creativity of local people in those remaking, it means that the local broadcasting will have a very good*

prospect...remaking is a way of learning. The local people have to learn from the process and develop their own style of making TV programme later. If not remaking is just a reason to be lazy.... Remaking can give job opportunity and on-job training to the local people, but they have to remake and copy wisely...remaking is good but not copycatting totally. Because if this phenomenon continues, Malaysian will just depend on other country's TV programme, and less concentrate on own TV production...remaking is the key success for Malaysia broadcasting ...everywhere have remaking, just the ideas which had insert in the programme, make the remade programme look interesting and unique."

Generally the respondents can recognised that programmes have been copied from other countries and the most frequently adapted programmes are game shows, reality shows and dramas. Local producers suspicion that the local audience perceive format adapted programmes produced locally are inferior in quality is somewhat confirmed through these interviews.

There are some quite sophisticated understanding of copycat television and the broadcast industry among the respondents as well as ambivalence about its impact on the programme and the broadcast industry. Discussion of what constitutes a good broadcasting industry and the kind of identity it should have, have been indicated in their answers. They were also able to link bottom line economics with quality of programmes some pointing out that too much imitation would curtail creativity and innovation. There is also awareness among audience that there is a large amount of programmes that have the same overall storyline and structure to appeal to the audience.

This exercise shows that audience are active readers as far as understanding how commercial television works particularly in constantly drawing them through indigenizing foreign programmes to suit the taste of the locals and audience. However, as pointed out by Morley (1996:291) that there is a difference between having power over the text and power over the agenda within which that text is constructed and presented. These respondents, have power over the text as demonstrated in their awareness of the process of copycatting at work and the prevailing policies that prevent "*sensitive issues*" being raised on television programmes and the filtering process by the Censorship Board. However, these respondents also realise that they lack of power over the agenda in which the text is constructed. They even feel a sense of helplessness as consumers. This is illustrated by a comment from one of the respondents "*audien tidak berkuasa memilih dan mengawal apa yang ditayangkan (audience do not have the power to choose or control programmes.)*"

Again, in general television audience may call up stations to complain about the structure or schedule of programmes like too many commercial breaks during the

viewing of their favourite programme. The proliferation of many interactive programmes like game shows where audience can call in to participate also gives the illusion of empowerment of the audience but respondents are aware that their power is limited and they have little choice and most are resigned to the fact that they get too much low quality imitations and advertisements. This feeling is illustrated in the following comments by a group of university students : “ *FA mampu jimatkan kos and mengoptimumkan keuntungan...pasaran besar agak terjamin dengan FA...prefer rancangan tempatan atau FA?...Dua-dua pun ok tapi sebagai penonton, kita tak ada kuasa dan pilihan, Cuma tonton apa yang ada saja (FA helps save cost and maximise profit...a big market in assured with FA...prefer local or FA?...both also ok but as audience we have no power nor choice).*” From the standpoint of some of these respondents, the audience’s choice is really to be consumers of what is being offered in the market rather than citizens who have access to diverse form of information and cultural artefacts.

Conclusion

The liberal accounts of a free market responding to the needs, wants and views of their audience seems to fall apart when looking at television responses to format television. The need to import, format adapt programmes, buy licenses to tried, tested and successful programmes by private television stations are determined ultimately to increase audience ratings and consequently advertising dollars. Thus far we have we have seen that market forces have tended to prioritise profit, rather than increasing public’s choices. The temptation to use copycat programmes is great especially so when the competition is intense where television ratings of the rival station increases with a licensed clone and pulling in the advertising dollars. The media market becomes distorted in the process, skewed towards popular profitable format which leads to a narrowing of cultural diversity of the media. This shows that consumers are hardly sovereign.

In the case of Malaysia, the argument that the invisible hand of the free market breaks off control by the state is too simplistic and naïve. The ownership and control of private television stations here have very close links with the ruling elites and just as Hall (1986) pointed out that the media would be shaped by the dominant culture and power structures in society. The control of the media by the state whether through guidelines, policies or ownership have continued to curb a full range of political, economic as well as cultural interests in the media. In such a situation, the notion of public communication that serve public and not private interests will never in reality be achieved given this kind of policies and profit maximizing motives.

Although pluralists view consumers as sovereign and can voice their concerns, interviews with respondents show that they are resigned to the fact that the avenue for them is at best narrow if not non-existent. Divergent interests and citizens voice can only be assured if a public sphere of the media is created relatively autonomous of

the state and the market. Curran (1991:48-52) suggests four different approaches that may provide for a media that reflect divergent interest and voices. The four approaches are centrally controlled market economy, mandated market economy, regulated market economy and regulated mixed economy to enable divergent interests to be fully represented in the public domain. The first approach advocated that free market competition be centrally determined according to public interest so that it would provide for a mix of different types of programme and political representation. It emphasizes that different networks (cable television, commercial network, public trust corporation) be differentiated in organizational terms in order to promote choice.

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is an example of a publicly owned station that is run for the public good rather than for private gain. Even so, BBC is now under pressure to make the station economically viable. The second approach, in line with the Dutch broadcasting system, upholds that airtime and use of publicly owned production facilities be distributed to different groups (commercial groups, conservative and protestant organization) and each group provide their package of service. The intention is to provide for diversity on political opinion and cultural values. The third approach is based on the Swedish Press System which emphasizes the lowering of barriers to market entry and a Press Subsidies Board that help under-resourced groups to set up a viable project within an atmosphere where monopoly is averted through the introduction of subsidies scheme. The fourth approach entails the publicly owned sector committed to public-service goals, the market sector committed to fund the civic sector that aims to broaden the ideological and cultural range. The civic centre would be assigned frequencies and an Enterprise Board would provide aid to groups such as consumers, employee groups to take ownership of the media.

Learning from these four models, certainly there is a need to have a station that is run for the public good, a more equitable distribution of production facilities and airtime to different groups and schemes that help fund under resource groups in order to develop a more vibrant broadcasting system in Malaysia that provides for cultural diversity and respects audience as citizens and not merely as consumers.

Given the structures of power, it would be hard to restructure the media industry to one that would cater for public interest. The ruling elites and private owners will fight hard to maintain status quo but they must be persuaded to accept that providing space or divergent voices would not only develop a more robust broadcasting system with more variety but a society that is more knowledgeable and less “mindless” and “frivolous”.

Media professionals must be bold to take on changes and challenges. Last year TV2 axed a special feature entitled “*Chinese Dailies and their Cultural Role*” that raised

questions on the inability of the Chinese dailies playing the role of a watchdog because of its political affiliations and commercial pressures. TV2 had originally scheduled the 10-minute-long feature in two parts for its Mandarin news. The first part was aired but the second part was chopped by the Deputy Information Minister Donald Lim. The reason given to chop the second part was because it created confusion in the community and the Ministry did not want Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) to get involved in the Chinese dailies competitionⁱⁱ. (<http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/18549>). Many media professionals are afraid to speak up and even if they do, they prefer to remain anonymous for fear losing their job or fear of jeopardising the career. They also fear that the audience will not give their support because there isn't a clear demand from the audience for truth and senseless censorship are tolerated.

This arbitrary censorship in a public television and prioritizing profit before public interest in private station makes it all the more urgent for citizens to possess a sphere that is free from the both state and the market control so that divergent voices and choices could be offered. This is already a reality as can be seen in the case of online newspaper *Malaysiakini*. However this must also be extended to television broadcasting because it reaches a bigger audience. Given the responses from this research, audiences are not passive consumers, they have very concrete needs and wants and decision and choices to make in life. Only a well informed society would enable it to make accurate choices.

Endnotes

ⁱ UMNO is of the political parties in the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional.

ⁱⁱ In the last two decades Chinese dailies have been moving towards greater consolidation and concentration of ownership. The latest move MCA's takeover of Nanyang. A media boycott was called but the takeover eventually took place, and invariably the content of the paper took different direction. Amidst all this, *Oriental Daily*, was born, providing fairer news but nonetheless Oriental is still quite cautious in its reporting (*Aliran Monthly* 23:7, 2003).

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