

Full Length Research Paper

The local content industry and cultural identity in Malaysia

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The expeditious growth of the local media industry is a catalyst to the escalation of the local content industry. The content industry does not merely create and publish content in the forms of information, entertainment and education programmes, but is construed as an industry of culture that disseminates society values, lifestyles and norms to its target audience. In the globalisation process, the growing sentiment of concern is that the unrestricted flow of media content may unconsciously influence the younger generation into incorporating foreign culture into the current environment. For content relevant to the needs of the younger generation, it is preferable for local content to be accorded a higher ratio in the media industry. Conclusively, the ratio figure should be determined based on the objective of transforming media audience into informed and knowledgeable citizens and not merely consumers who chart the ratings or profit of the broadcasting stations.

Key words: Local content, cultural identity, Malaysian media, media industry.

INTRODUCTION

The growth of the Malaysian media industry has exploded since the 1980s, concurrent with the following steps undertaken by the government; liberalising control towards print media, privatisation policy of broadcast media, as well as thrust of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) in management, business and in the everyday activities of society. This exponential growth of the media industry is correlated to the content industry. The positive impact of this unprecedented growth on the nation can only be viable if accompanied by suitable media content. The local media industry is heavily dependant on imported media content as currently, demand supersedes supply.

The expeditious growth of the local media industry is a catalyst to the escalation of the local content industry. However, it is imperative to ensure that this augmentation yields quality and not quantity. Substantial quality of local programmes is a pre-requisite to meet the nation's and society's aspirations. The content industry does not

merely create and publish content in the forms of information, entertainment and education programmes, but is construed as an industry of culture that disseminates society values, lifestyles and norms to its target audience (Chong, 2000; Grixiti, 2006). According to Nesbitt (2006) in terms of national cultural content, it seems that citizens and national institutions have less and less choice but to do anything other than negotiate in the process of cultural globalization. The individual negotiates cultural identity through media messages in an environment characterized by a steadily decreasing amount of pure (minimally market-biased) content with respect to national culture and identity.

The unplanned development of the content industry not only generates inappropriate information but also spreads materials deemed as pleasurable consumption that will influence values, lifestyle and society's living norms. According to Thompson (1997) '... the production and consumption of cultural representations affect the construction of cultural identities – national, ethnic, religious, occupational, family, sex and gender'. In the era of globalisation where information transcends borders hence impeding suitable censorship, preserving cultural

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identity is vital. No nation can disregard the wave of globalisation. According to Held and McGrew (2007), globalisation as a one sided process that is capable of reinforcing if not extending the already unbalanced power and wealth both between nations as well as the various sectors in a nation. Since today's media is a powerful industry with transnational interests and importance, the preponderant flow of information from western societies to the rest of the world has engaged the western media in issues of cultural hegemony.

Banerjee (2002) and McMillan (2001) argued that the growth of local and regional media production and programming could challenge the very basis of media and cultural influence on identity. Weber (2003) observed that in spite of the rapid modernization of Asian countries through linking into global economic growth and relatively stable political and social order, there remain concerns over issues of cultural autonomy. Instead of embracing the global televisual countries such as China, Malaysia and Singapore, attempts are being made to reinforce their local cultural identity.

Facing such a situation, a nation needs to protect its sovereignty from the influence of undesirable foreign content. The question now is how will the local content industry respond to the arising demands of the current environment? This article explores the issues pertaining to local mass media content. In general the article examines the relevance of media content as a cultural commodity, the mitigation and availability of content prior to expounding local content, the ratio of local to foreign content and a balanced approach in services rendered.

MEDIA CONTENT AS A CULTURAL COMMODITY

Media content is regarded as a pertinent information commodity in a nation's development. Regulating produced media content is vital to the nation's endeavour to develop an information society. According to Bowes (1981), uncontrolled information pollution similar to unchecked industrial pollution, will adversely affect society.

Globalisation allows for greater and speedier access to new content. Although prior consent is required for the inflow of global media content into a nation, in order to prevent the ramifications on national sovereignty, many nations do not have the resources to control such invasion (Hall, 2000). The responsibility and task to preserve a nation's information sovereignty should not be borne solely by international agencies. Instead this should be monitored by respective government legislation and the local content industry.

Liebes and Katz (1990) commented that the media is not only an avenue to disseminate information in order for one to be more informed but is to be considered an educational opportunity where characters and incidents are sketched accordingly to eventually form the cultural

identity of a society. By evoking similarities in rituals, symbols and cultural background, media has the ability to instil the concept of cultural identity amongst its audience.

In the globalisation process, the growing sentiment of concern is that the unrestricted flow of media content may unconsciously influence the younger generation into incorporating foreign culture into the current environment. Tomlinson (1999) did not deny that the mode of communication in the globalisation process may create mediated deterritorialization; a loss of ability to distinguish culture as per geographical and social environments.

We are vulnerable to the integration and disintegration of culture where foreign cultural elements permeate and assimilate into our culture whilst simultaneously replacing it with one that is infiltrated with foreign elements. This eventuality has been recognised by Pieterse (1995: 62), where he accedes that in the globalisation process, the introvert culture which has long been in existence as well as the translocal culture are being shadowed by a foreign culture with elements that will eventually be more prominent.

Foreign influences converging into translocal culture are not only disseminated directly via global media networks' programmes and advertising, but are also circulated through the local media network that features imported products. The borderless world has allowed foreign influence infiltrate local content in the form of local characters bearing messages of foreign cultural identity. The younger generation, avid fans of these programmes, have consciously or sub-consciously allowed elements of foreign culture to be etched in their values and actions. While we may try to deny the assimilation process, the truth is evident in their choice of food, clothes, aspiration and values, among others.

Ohame (1999) in his observation on the influence of globalisation shaping the youth of Japan has commented that the preference for renowned foreign brands for drinks, apparels, jeans and shoes has also commodified perception and social values. According to Ohame (1999), the younger generation known as 'Nintendo Kids' are shifting from acquiescence of traditional values such as authority and conformity to becoming more open, vocal and creative. This trend, according to Ohame, is due to the advent of technological gadgets such as the computer, computer games and interactive media.

On the other hand, Strelltz (2003) in a study of the 'homeland' students in South Africa found that initially they appreciated American values, such as material abundance, freedom and personal choice due to their exposure to American television programmes. However, the 'homeland' students resorted to viewed local programmes when they feel the campus environment alienated them from the main student body. The meanings the 'homeland' students take from the local programmes they watch play an important role in cementing their particular identities that is traditional Africans.

The media industry no longer assumes the mass market as one entity. The mass market is diverse, each with varying needs. As the media industry is driven predominantly by advertising and subscription for cash flow, scheduling and programming that are mass market oriented yet meeting the requirements of individual target groups are the prime objective. Station authorities with underlying economic interests operate based on the demands and desires of its three main markets; the political market which is interested in the factual genre, news and current affairs, the business market which needs the latest investment and financial updates and the popular market that wishes to be entertained with interesting and enthralling programmes. Serveas (2006) commented that Asian countries (Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Philippines, India, Japan and China) in recent years have shown that domestic cultural products enjoy a competitive edge over imports. Local productions with their familiar language and cultural context have the advantage of cultural proximity.

LOCAL CONTENT AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Based on the discussion regarding globalisation, media advent and media content as a cultural commodity, we need to ask ourselves what kind of local content is suitable for us to develop to meet the nation's aspiration. Each media has a different content application. As such, it is difficult to determine specifically what suitable local media content is, Malaysia being a multiracial and multireligion developing country. However, it is essential to heed the following pointers when producing local content in Malaysia:

1. Act as change catalyst to achieve the nation's development goals.
2. Cultivate an informative and knowledgeable society.
3. Mirror and fortify society's positive values, beliefs and norms.
4. Bring to discussion on the international arena issues faced by local communities.
5. Portray and propagate community, national and religious images as a harmonious multiracial society.

It needs to be ascertained that local content does not necessarily need to be produced within the country. It can be conceptualised and produced internationally. Likewise items locally developed and manufactured should not be automatically considered local content. The term 'Made in Malaysia' should only be utilised when it expounds values, lifestyle, culture and aspirations of the nation. As such 'Made in Malaysia' programmes cannot be automatically considered local content if we perceive content industry as a cultural industry. In a world where the economic perspective of content is of critical importance, content that does not possess the qualities of

being Malaysian can still be considered local content as it generates profit for the owner. This classification needs to take into account the assorted content produced by the various media platforms.

Media content needs to be viewed from the perspective of structure/medium- content-audience/consumer, where content is intertwined with medium and target audience. Media audience is participative. As such media content needs to be observed from two perspectives - sent and received. Content sent is encoded within the message but the content received is what is decoded by the receiver.

The symbolic form of the message has a privileged short-term and long-term impact in the communicative exchange and the moments of encoding and decoding are determinative moments influencing the ideology and cultural identity of the content. Realising this implication, we have to explore the codes and conventions employed by the local content industry and ensure it has the capacity to produce content that feature values and images reflective of local culture and the nation's aspirations. From a general perspective, local content can be inferred as media content that portray Malaysian characteristics, evoke Malaysian identity through values, norms and lifestyles of various ethnics and motivate society to achieve the nation's aspirations.

LOCAL AND FOREIGN MEDIA CONTENT RATIO

The service issue and content ratio is relevant to media content diversity. From the consumer's point of view, media content diversity refers to quantity and choice – the bigger the options of quantity and choice, the more diverse the media. In the broadcasting medium, horizontal diversity refers to the choice of different media whereas vertical diversity refers to various choices available in one media. McQuail (2009) stated that media diversity is evident based on these four dimensions:

1. Format and issues – referring to media function such as entertaining, informing, educating, etc.
2. Content – based on opinions, topical information and news.
3. Individual and groups – not merely emerging in the media but how it is construed by the media.
4. Coverage – from the geographical and relevance aspects.

The underpinnings of content diversity produced by the local content industry must embrace both social and national considerations. Its obligation should not only lie with the government and media owners but necessitates the inclusion of minorities, territorial needs, sections of society etc. Media performance is not solely assessed on its impact on industry but also its ability to explicate consumers' viewpoint on the usage of the service, on the

suitability and impact of the service on their lifestyles and also its affordability.

With regards to the ratio of local to foreign content, what needs to be addressed is how diverse the prepared content is. What is the disparity between MTV and a locally produced music-show? Can the latter be classified as local content if a high percentage of foreign music clips are featured? If local content refers to depicting local traits and cultural identity, are not both programmes then rightfully foreign content?

This gives rise to the impending question on the extent of diversity in local content. Diversity of television content is evident in the themes and categories of content broadcasted. Take for example five different reality show programmes but all with an identical theme – singing competition – clearly illustrates the absence of horizontal or vertical diversity. Does a cooking programme at four television stations, featuring different chefs suggest content diversity or otherwise, taking into consideration that it is basically grouped under the same themed content.

Let's revert to the question of an appropriate ratio of foreign content; there is an imminent requirement for the reconceptualization of media diversity to ensure the local and foreign content are complementary. There needs to be a mutual consensus between local and foreign content in catering to 'audiences / consumers' and the nation's expectations. What can we produce locally that cannot be obtained from the foreign content market?

The ratio of local to foreign content can be determined by the content category namely entertainment, education and information which can subsequently be divided into sub-categories. For example in the sub-category of science and technology, we would require a higher ratio of foreign content as the local market is not sufficiently equipped to produce such content. For content relevant to the needs of the younger generation, it is preferable for local content to be accorded a higher ratio. Conclusively, the ratio figure is determined based on the objective of transforming media audience into informed and knowledgeable citizens and not merely consumers who chart the ratings or profit of the station.

A simple analysis of television programme broadcast over Malaysian terrestrial television stations was conducted. Two sets of data were collected representing a week from August 12 to 18, 2007 and another set from August 9 to 15, 2010. TV guide from a leading English language newspaper 'star' was used to calculate the number of hours of local versus foreign programmes shown on various channels for a particular week. Ratio of each category of programme was calculated by dividing the number of hours of local or foreign programmes by the total airtime for a particular television station.

The analysis of programme transmission in the week of August 12 to 18, 2007 depicts local to foreign ratio on terrestrial television (TV1, TV2, TV3, and NTV7) at 51:49 (Table 1). This ratio, however, differs from individual

Table 1. Ratio of local versus foreign television programmes.

TV stations	12-18 August 2007	4-10 January 2010
TV1	91:9	75:25
TV2	41:59	52:48
TV3	52:48	75:25
NTV7	17:83	17:83
TV8	-	32:68
TV9	-	72:28

stations. For broadcasting stations operated by government agency, the national network TV1 had a ratio of 91:9 favouring local content. However, on the second channel TV2, local content was somehow reduced to 41% compared to 59% of foreign content. With regard to commercial stations, TV3 had somewhat balanced content ratio favouring the local content at 52% against foreign content at 48%. Another commercial station NTV7 clearly relied on foreign content whereby 83% of the programmes televised were imported. Local content for NTV7 was at 17% only. These ratio of local versus foreign content indicate that we have still not achieved the targeted ratio, stipulated in 1990s by the Ministry of Information of 80:20 ratio which was to be attained by 2000. The overall ratio of local content is further reduced when taking into account transmission of satellite broadcaster, ASTRO which offers 88 channels to subscribers.

A second analysis of programmes from August 9 to 15, 2010 did not show much changes in the ratio of local versus foreign programmes broadcast over terrestrial television in Malaysia. TV1 which used to be the national channel and focus on different genre of programmes has now become information channel focusing on news, documentary and talk shows used 75% local programmes. TV2 another government run channel has somewhat improve on its local content from 41 to 52%. The leading private station TV3, made lots of improvement in incorporating local programmes which in 2010 stands at 72% compared at only 52% in 2007. For NTV7 which is targeting the Malaysian Chinese ethnic market, not much have changed since the ratio remains almost constant in the two periods. Two new channels, TV8 and TV9, have different target segments. TV8 which is targeting the urban young generation broadcast 68% of its airtime on foreign programmes. On the other hand, TV9 have a higher percentage of 72% local programmes due to its concentration on targeting rural Malay population. The overall ratio of local programmes slightly improved from 51% in 2007 to 54% in 2010. With the recent integration of 'information' and 'communication' component under one roof in the new Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture, a more viable local content ratio should be formulated and enforced. A ratio of 60:40 favouring the local content should be more

appropriate new target as it is more practical and achievable. What about the local content in radio broadcasts? The mushrooming of private stations such as ERA, HotFM, Sinar FM, Light and Easy, Time Highway and others, with focused genres, increases content on airwaves, irrespective of local or foreign. Are these transmissions of songs considered broadcast content? If yes, then we may be facing a higher foreign ratio, as commercial radios favour foreign content, especially songs from the West. It may be necessary in the context of radio content to base research on where the programme is created. Radio broadcasters offer horizontal content diversity as they find their audience increasingly fragmented, with language options pending on ethnicity. Given the economics of radio content, a higher local content ratio is desired of radio broadcast services.

With reference to local content in advertising, the 'Made-in-Malaysia' guideline suggested at least 75% of advertising footage must be local footage depicting Malaysian and their way of life. Advertisers were encouraged to use models that represents different Malaysian ethnic groups against Pan-Asian look which does not truly representing Malaysian ethnic identity. However, it is contended that there still exists favouritism towards Malaysian with Pan-Asian looks. Related to ethnic issues, local advertising agencies were encouraged to be more sensitive towards ethnic representation in relation to products and background settings, skewing away from stereotypical ethnic portrayal. For example why are specific ethnic groups featured with influential products embraced by affluent milieu while people of other ethnic lineage are frequently featured with low status products in similarly low status ambience? Any prejudice and stereotyping of ethnic especially in advertisements should not be encouraged.

LOCAL CONTENT AND PRIME TIME FIXTURES

Do we need to mandate prime time fixtures? Prime time is the block of a day's programming schedule with the highest number of audience and is generally when stations reap much of their advertising revenues. Prime time also presents the best available opportunity to effectively instil desired cultural values within the society. Do we establish one prime time slot or various prime time slots depending on the targeted audience across the diverging media delivery platforms?

We have diverse audience/consumer segments. Each of these segments adopts assorted lifestyles and plays varied roles in heeding the nation's aspirations. Relevantly, we would require different prime time slots to capture their undivided attention for the conveying of desired messages. Take for example, the prime time for teenagers would differ from that of homemakers. In addition, is it suitable for us to specify prime time for

families between 8 to 10 pm? Is not encouraging the family to spend these hours in front of the television conflicting with the lifestyles of school-going children who should rightfully at the said time be completing their schoolwork or revising?

Do we need to associate prime time with local content? The answer reverts to the objective of what needs to be achieved during this slot? If we want teenagers to delve into information technology, to be more confident as well as to have a stimulating role model, and if we are unable to produce such content locally we can still feature foreign content. What it means is that we should not constrain ourselves with local content if it is incapable of accomplishing the objectives of prime time which indirectly achieves the nation's aspirations.

The existence of satellite television station such as ASTRO, streaming channel options for respective audience allow programmes to be catered for individual needs through pay-per-view and also interactively through subscription. As such, prime time slots are no longer determined by the broadcast station but by the audience or consumers. The question that arises is how we overcome the issue of local versus foreign content. On a whole, these stations broadcast foreign content from global media networks namely HBO, Cinemax, Disney and others.

CONCLUSION

The potential for the local content market to grow cannot be denied. However, its growth needs to be monitored to ensure it does not stray from the nation's aspirations. Local content should not be restricted to using Bahasa Melayu or the national language only. Usage of a language that is comprehensible to segments of the local community can be construed as local content. What we want to steer clear of in local content are values, norms and lifestyles that contradict with the culture that we want to preserve and bequeath to the next generation. Our final analysis questions our requirement of the national broadcast industry. Do we perceive it as an economically viable entity that reaps benefits by compromising its consumers for advertising revenue? Alternatively, do we recognise the industry as playing a pivotal role in shaping the society in adherence to our aspirations, value identities and culture? It cannot be denied that our position is unique. We have inherited a country of diverse ethnicity and religions. We are proud of our Eastern values and culture. Should not this uniqueness be a heritage that we pass down from generation to generation? In this context, with proper outline and plans, local content can contribute positively to society and the nation.

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