

CULTURAL EXCHANGE THROUGH BROADCASTING IN ASIA: A STUDY OF MALAYSIAN TELEVISION CONTENTS

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ABSTRACT

Broadcasting is a contemporary channel of cultural exchange for many countries around the world. This study looks at cultural exchange in Malaysian terrestrial free-to-air television and discusses several contributing factors and constraints to the broadcasting of foreign programs on Malaysian television. The Malaysian terrestrial broadcasting landscape is made up of a government station broadcasting on two channels, and four television channels owned and operated by the Malaysian media giant, Media Prima. A brief analysis of weekly television programs shows that the greatest percentage of programs (in number and airtime) aired over Malaysian terrestrial television are in English, followed by local Malay language programs. Television programs in Chinese come third, and programs in other languages (namely various Asian languages and Spanish) make up smaller percentages of Malaysian terrestrial television content. The relatively small broadcasting market in Malaysia coupled with audience segmentation, are possible constraints to regional cultural exchange through broadcasting in this country. Furthermore, Malaysian media policy favors programming that serves local media players and content that encourages the formation of national cultural identity, two things that foreign programs are not able to do. Nonetheless, the prevalence of English language programming, both local and foreign (mainly American) is an anomaly. This shows the success of American cultural exports and their influence on market demand of popular television programs.

Keywords: *broadcasting cooperation, regional broadcasting, terrestrial television, media policy, broadcasting market*

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to provide a brief overview of cultural exchange in Malaysian terrestrial free-to-air television, and to discuss possible factors associated with the airing of international programs on Malaysian television.

An introduction to cultural exchange looks at the possible types of exchange that occur. This is followed by a brief profile of the regional broadcasting cooperation. The paper then sets the context for discussion by looking at the Malaysian broadcasting landscape. A short quantitative analysis of the programs aired over Malaysian terrestrial television stations studies the break-down programs according to language. This is followed by a discussion of the factors that contribute to the level of cultural exchange found in the Malaysian terrestrial television.

CULTURAL EXCHANGE

Many countries in Asia have enjoyed long standing alliances in various spheres of culture, namely: collaboration in the domain of Audiovisual and Cinema, Cultural and Artistic Exchanges, Heritage, Museology and Conservation, and Books and Publications. Such contemporary cultural exchange is most often facilitated by institutional mechanisms set up to foster linkages between countries. Governments play an important role in setting up these linkages through various intergovernmental agreements regarding information technology, film industry and broadcasting. Activities that result from such linkages include the exchange of personnel and materials in the fields of television and radio; the exchange of radio and television programs on cultural topics; live classical or traditional music programs via radio and television channels in each nation; and “twin” radio stations simultaneously broadcasting live programs on special occasions.

Cooperation and exchange in these pervasive domains seek to foster friendly relations between the peoples of member countries and to strengthen cultural cooperation based on the principles of mutual respect for sovereignty, equality, reciprocity and mutual benefit. Such cultural exchanges provide opportunity for the member countries to learn about each other’s distinctive cultures and traditions. The intergovernmental agreements reflect the readiness of all parties to create a basis for a sound friendship through further development of public relations and the dissemination of information and culture. This creates better understanding while enhancing the traditions and distinct characteristics of both cultures. These links and relationships would ultimately lead to greater harmony and deeper comprehension in this world of differences and bring along peaceful alternative solutions to the world’s problems.

In May 2004, at the inauguration of the dialogue on “Global Broadcasting, Cultural Diversity and Regulation” in Barcelona, Spain, this issue was emphasized: collaboration and commitment of audiovisual authorities worldwide to foster cultural diversity through radio and television. The dialogue urged that audiovisual regulatory organizations establish mechanisms for collaboration to respond to various problems affecting communication.

REGIONAL BROADCASTING COOPERATION

Regional cooperation in the field of broadcasting plays an important role in establishing the framework and mechanisms for cultural exchange. In many instances, such cooperation comes in the form of broadcasting unions and associations. Among the existing regional broadcasting unions are the European

Broadcasting Union (EBU), the Caribbean Broadcasting Union (CBU) and the Arab States Broadcasting Union (ASBU). Major associations include the Commonwealth Broadcasting Organization, the Public Broadcasting International and the Islamic States Broadcasting Organization.

The European Broadcasting Union (EBU) is the largest professional association of national broadcasters in the world. It has 74 active members in 54 countries spanning across Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, and 44 associate Members in 25 other countries around the world. EBU was founded in February 1950 by western European radio and television broadcasters and merged with the OIRT— its counterpart in Eastern Europe — in 1993. Working on behalf of its members in the European area, the EBU negotiates broadcasting rights for major sports events, operates the Eurovision and Euroradio networks, organizes program exchanges, stimulates and coordinates co-productions, and provides a full range of other operational, commercial, technical, legal and strategic services.

The Caribbean Broadcasting Union (CBU) represents both public and private broadcasting systems in the English, French, Spanish and Dutch speaking Caribbean. Associate membership has been granted to a number of organizations, of Caribbean as well as non-Caribbean origins, which provide services essential to broadcasting and serve the interests of the CBU.

The Arab States Broadcasting Union (ASBU) is one of the oldest Arab joint action institutions pertaining to the League of Arab States system. The first conference of Arab broadcasters, held in August 1955, issued a recommendation whereby Arab states were urged to adopt a draft convention on the creation of an Arab States Broadcasting Union. The first Ordinary General Assembly of the new body convened in February 1969 at Khartoum, Sudan to declare officially the creation of the Arab States Broadcasting Union and defined its overall objective in these terms: to strengthen relations, foster cooperation among Arab audio-visual broadcasting institutions with a view to enhancing their performances in both form and content, thus enabling the newly-created organization to fully play its role in bolstering Arab brotherhood and raising an Arab generation conscious and proud of its Arab national identity.

BROADCASTING COOPERATION IN ASIA

In Asia presently there are at least two major broadcasting organizations, namely the Asian Broadcasting Union (ABU) and The Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development (AIBD).

The ABU was established in 1964 to facilitate the development of broadcasting in the Asia-Pacific region and to organize co-operative activities amongst its members. It currently has over 160 members in 55 countries and regions, reaching a potential audience of about 3 billion people. The ABU provides a forum for promoting the collective interests of television and radio broadcasters, and one of its main objectives is to promote regional and international mutual understanding and cooperation through the medium of broadcasting.

ABU activities include a daily satellite TV news exchange (Asiavision), co-production and exchange of programs, rights-free content acquisition for developing countries, negotiating rights for major sports events and organizing coverage,

technical, programming and management consultancy services, and annual competition for radio and television programs (ABU Prizes).

Since its launch in 1984, ABU's Asiavision has been a major source of news for and about Asia. A daily exchange of television news items by satellite, it brings together 16 of Asia's leading broadcasters: BTV-Bangladesh, BBS-Bhutan, RTB-Brunei, CCTV-China, TVB-Hong Kong, DDI-India, IRIB-Iran, NHK-Japan, RTM-Malaysia, NTV-Nepal, PTV-Pakistan, Channel News Asia-Singapore, SLRC-Sri Lanka, MCOT-Thailand, RTTL-Timor Leste, and TRT-Turkey.

Another major regional broadcasting organization is the Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development (AIBD). Hosted by the Government of Malaysia, this institute supplements and compliments the activities of the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU). AIBD serves countries of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN-ESCAP) in the field of electronic media development. AIBD was begun in the late 60s as a UNDP-funded project, implemented by UNESCO. The Agreement Establishing the AIBD was formally concluded on 12 August 1977 in Kuala Lumpur. The institute's mission is to encourage regional dialogue and cooperation in electronic media policy of the Asia-Pacific region, provide an Asia-Pacific regional platform for international cooperation in the electronic media development, assist member countries in human resource development in electronic media consistent with their development needs, and to assist member countries with electronic media consultancy.

MALAYSIAN BROADCASTING SCENE

Television broadcasting in Malaysia began with a single channel, TV1, on 28 December 1963, with a second channel, TV2, launched six years later. Both the channels are government owned. TV1 consists of mostly local educational and information programs in the national language, Malay. TV2 is primarily entertainment oriented, offering movies and other programming in English, Tamil and Chinese. Malaysia's television services were merged with radio under the Ministry of Information in 1969 with the new name Radio Television Malaysia (RTM).

In 1984 a pioneering effort at private broadcasting was launched with the opening of TV3, Malaysia's first private television station. As are Malaysia's other private television stations (namely NTV7, 8TV and TV9), TV3 is owned by Media Prima Bhd. which emerged as a giant media player with its monopoly of private free-to-air (FTA) television stations. Media Prima also owns private radio stations Hot FM and Fly FM, as well as the New Straits Times Press (NSTP).

Media Prima is enjoying approximately 48% of Malaysia television viewership, with its closest rival the pay-television satellite operator, Astro, which has a market share of roughly 20 to 30%. In the pay-TV segment, new entrant MiTV is positioning itself to take on Astro, the market leader. Astro is a subscription-based company under the trademark of MEASAT Broadcast Network Systems Sdn. Bhd., a consortium company of government and private companies. Astro offers over forty channels of entertainment, information and educational programs transmitted via satellite. It also has thirteen radio stations, providing Malaysians with a selection of local, regional and international programming.

As such, Malaysian television viewers currently have a choice of over 28 channels, of which 22 are via satellite, 10 cable and the remaining six are normal channels. All stations are required to include 80 per cent local programs in their entire program content.

The Malaysian Parliament, approved by the Broadcasting Act, gives the Minister of Information the authority to monitor and control all radio and television broadcasting. The minister may revoke any license held by a private company deemed to have violated the provisions of this act. The government also has strict codes to protect the television industry, of which we can name the May 2002 version of the Malaysian Advertising Code of Ethics for Television and Radio. This code controls the content of commercials and advertisements. The code restricts programs or advertisements that promote an excessively materialistic lifestyle. In addition, using sex to sell products is restricted, and scenes involving models undressing are not allowed. Women have a strict dress code: they must be covered from the neckline to below the knees. Swimming trunks for men and women can only be shown in scenes involving sporting or athletic events. All scenes or shots must be filmed in Malaysia, and only 20 percent of foreign footage is allowed only after it is approved by the minister. Moreover, all musicals and songs must be produced in Malaysia. Unacceptable products, services, and scenes including alcoholic beverages are prohibited, and dramatizations that show the application of products to certain parts of the body, such as the armpits, are restricted. Clothes with imported words or symbols are restricted, because they may convey undesirable messages. Other restrictions include scenes which suggest intimacy, disco scenes, feminine napkins, and kissing between adults.

The ruling to give locally produced programs the prime time airing slot was enforced in early 1998. In the same year, the Information Minister directed NTV7 to “adhere to Malaysia’s broadcasting guidelines” by not airing foreign programs during prime time. The then Minister, Datuk Seri Mohamed Rahmat, said the station should be more sensitive towards national interest and must be committed and must avoid broadcasting foreign shows during prime time,” (New Straits Times Press, Ltd. Apr 20, 1998). NTV7 operated by Net Seven Sdn. Bhd., started operations nationwide on April 7. The station airs numerous Chinese martial arts shows during prime time on weekdays. The minister also said if NTV7 continues with such a format, the channel can be penalized and its broadcasting license revoked.

METHODOLOGY

Data for government owned television station, RTM, were taken from the Information Ministry’s 2004 Annual Report, and private television channels’ programming schedules for the one week period Sunday 20 June to Monday 26 June 2006 were from the *New Straits Time*. Programs were categorized by language as follows:

- Programs in locally spoken languages (Malay, English, Chinese, and Tamil/Hindi)
- Programs in foreign languages (languages other than locally spoken languages)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The broadcasting market in Malaysia is relatively small and it is not surprising smaller players find it hard to survive. The market is also too segmented for the individual players, who lack the economies of scale to tap and respond efficiently to the various market demands. This makes having a diversified media business quite necessary. Overall, the competition in the broadcasting industry for viewership and the advertising ringgit is intensifying with Media Prima expected to continue its aggressive fight for market share and Astro taking steps to fend off any potential competition from the new rival, MiTV. As for RTM, its emphasis—which is more on gaining viewers and credibility than increasing revenue—puts it in a different league. But it can afford to do so as, unlike the other TV stations, it receives an allocation from the government. TV stations need to have economies of scale and good programs to survive and remain competitive in a market size that is relatively small to start with. TV stations that offer the best programs and are cost-efficient will be the ones that will likely fare better. For the viewers, the competition has brought them more choices. However, the question is how culturally-diverse are these choices? The following tables which display airtime of programs in various languages indicate that these choices involve mainly programs in Malay, English and Chinese.

Table 1:
Weekly RTM TV Programs by Language (2004)

Language	Time Length (Hr:Min)		Total Percentage
	RTM1	RTM2	
Malay	114:03	42:48	62.7%
English	9:45	32:17	17.8%
Chinese	2:54	24:43	11.8%
Tamil/Hindi	1:26	9:15	4.5%
Latin American	0:0	2:32	1.1%
Thai	0:2	0:45	0.8%
Korean	0:0	1:13	0.6%
Tagalog	0:6	1:08	0.5%
Indonesian	0:2	0:36	0.2%
Arabic	0:25	1:0	0.1%
Japanese	0:18	0:0	0.1%
Total	129:10	115:18	100%

Source: Ministry of Information

Table 2:
Weekly Private Terrestrial TV Programs by Language
(In Hours)

Language	TV Channels				Total Overall
	TV3	NTV7	8TV	TV9	
Malay	67:22 hrs	5:30 hrs	1 hr	28 hrs	101:52 hrs
	<i>66.13%</i>	<i>5.40%</i>	<i>0.98%</i>	<i>27.44%</i>	<i>100%</i>
	48.74%	5.18%	0.97%	50.45%	25.35%
English	51:59 hrs	67:15 hrs	64:30 hrs	22:30 hrs	206:14 hrs
	<i>25.21%</i>	<i>32.61%</i>	<i>31.27%</i>	<i>10.91%</i>	<i>100%</i>
	37.61%	63.29%	62.93%	40.54%	51.26%
Chinese	-	23 hrs	36:30 hrs	2 hrs	61:30 hrs
		<i>37.40%</i>	<i>59.35%</i>	<i>3.25%</i>	<i>100%</i>
		21.64%	35.61%	3.60%	15.28%
Tamil/Hindi	5:26 hrs	5 hrs	-	3 hrs	13:26 hrs
	<i>40.74%</i>	<i>37.04%</i>		<i>22.22%</i>	<i>100%</i>
	3.98%	4.71%		5.41%	3.35%
Korean	3:30 hrs	3:30 hrs	-	-	7 hrs
	<i>50.00%</i>	<i>50.00%</i>			<i>100%</i>
	2.53%	3.29%			1.74%
Latin American	6:20 hrs	-	-	-	6:20 hrs
	<i>100%</i>				<i>100%</i>
	4.52%				1.58%
Thai	3 hrs	-	-	-	3 hrs
	<i>100%</i>				<i>100%</i>
	2.17%				0.75%
Others	30 mins	2 hrs	30 mins	-	3 hrs
	<i>16.67%</i>	<i>66.67%</i>	<i>16.67%</i>		<i>100%</i>
	0.36%	1.89%	0.49%		0.75%
TOTAL	138.12 hrs	106:15 hrs	102:30 hrs	55:30 hrs	402:22 hrs
	<i>34.35%</i>	<i>26.41%</i>	<i>25.47%</i>	<i>13.79%</i>	<i>100%</i>
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Daily newspaper television programming schedule

* Horizontal percentages in italics refer to single language broadcasts over all channels and vertical percentages right aligned refer to languages broadcasted over single channel.

**Table 3:
Weekly Private Terrestrial TV Programs by Language
(By Number of Episodes)**

Language	TV Channels				Total
	TV3	NTV7	8TV	TV9	
Malay	112	10	1	43	166
	<i>67.47%</i>	<i>6.03%</i>	<i>0.60%</i>	<i>25.90%</i>	<i>100%</i>
	50.22%	7.04%	0.74%	51.19%	
English	92	95	95	39	321
	<i>28.67%</i>	<i>29.60%</i>	<i>29.60%</i>	<i>12.15%</i>	<i>100%</i>
	41.26%	66.90%	69.85%	46.43%	
Chinese	-	28	39	1	68
		<i>41.18%</i>	<i>57.35%</i>	<i>1.47%</i>	<i>100%</i>
		19.72%	28.68%	1.19%	
Korean	4	3	-	-	7
	<i>57.10%</i>	<i>42.86%</i>			<i>100%</i>
	1.79%	2.11%			
Tamil / Hindi	4	2	-	1	7
	<i>57.10%</i>	<i>28.57%</i>		<i>14.29%</i>	<i>100%</i>
	1.79%	1.41%		1.19%	
Latin American	7	-	-	-	7
	<i>100%</i>				<i>100%</i>
	3.14%				
Thai	3	-	-	-	3
	<i>100%</i>				<i>100%</i>
	1.35%				
Others	1	4	1	-	6
	<i>16.67%</i>	<i>66.67%</i>	<i>16.67%</i>		<i>100%</i>
	0.45%	2.82%	0.74%		
TOTAL	223	142	136	84	585
	<i>38.12%</i>	<i>24.27%</i>	<i>23.35%</i>	<i>14.36%</i>	<i>100%</i>
	100%	100%	100%	100%	

Source: Daily newspaper television programming schedule

*Horizontal percentages in italics refer to single language broadcasts over all channels and vertical percentages right aligned refer to languages broadcasted over single channel.

As shown in Table 1, over 60% of programs aired over RTM are in Malay, the national language of Malaysia. English and Chinese programs make up just over a quarter of RTM's content, thus allowing just 8% of total airtime for programs

in other languages. With Tamil/Hindi programs taking up over half of this small percentage of leftover airtime, programs in foreign languages make up only 3.4% of RTM's content. Cultural exchange in RTM is very low. Unlike other television stations in Malaysia whose very survival depends on profits and are thus motivated by audience ratings and advertising revenue, RTM's overriding philosophy is the protection of national interests. This is very much reflected in high percentage of programs in the national language (Malay) on RTM.

It is very interesting to note that RTM's broadcasting of programs in locally used languages somewhat mirrors the ethnic distribution of the Malaysian population where Malays make up a large majority, the Chinese make up a large minority and the Indians, a smaller minority of the population.

Although the percentage of programming in Chinese and Indian languages (Tamil/Hindi) is noticeably lower than the percentage of Chinese and Indian citizens (26% Chinese Malaysians vs. 11.8% Chinese programs, and 7.7% Indian Malaysians vs 4.5% Indian programs), this does not imply a language-exclusivist philosophy of programming because Malay is a language spoken by all the ethnic groups in the country. English is also a universal language understood by all ethnic groups. On the other hand, very few non-Chinese Malaysians speak Chinese, and very few non-Indian Malaysians speak any Indian languages. Thus, programs in Chinese and Tamil/Hindi are more ethnically targeted than programs in Malay or English. Nonetheless, it must be noted that programs in languages other than Malay are generally subtitled into Malay or English, enabling virtually most Malaysian audiences to follow them.

Because Malaysia is an ethnically diverse country, cultural exchange in Malaysian broadcasting encompasses not just the broadcasting of foreign programs, but also the broadcasting of programs that showcase the diversity of local cultures. Cultural exchange in the Malaysian context refers not only to exposure to non-Malaysian culture, but also to the need to cater to diverse local cultures, namely Malay culture, Chinese culture, and Indian culture.

However, if one were to use such a definition of cultural exchange in Malaysia, foreign cultural products, such as from Korea or Thailand, fare much better on Malaysian television than minority indigenous cultures in the country. A case in point is the complete lack of television programs in local minority indigenous languages such as Orang Asli or Sabah and Sarawak tribal languages. While some effort has been made at radio programs employing the languages of these groups and while programs featuring the cultures of indigenous groups in Sabah and Sarawak, and programs highlighting the plights of indigenous Orang Asli groups in peninsular Malaysia are often incorporated into locally produced programs, to date there have been no television programs in these languages.

There is much similarity between private broadcasters and RTM in the percentage of total airtime given to Chinese, Indian (Tamil/Hindi) and foreign language programs, there exists a difference in priority when it comes to Malay and English. While RTM stresses the broadcasting of programs in the national language (Malay), the private broadcasters seem to favor English over Malay. A closer look, however, indicates that it is NTV7 and 8TV that heavily favor English, while TV3 and TV9 devote slightly more airtime to Malay language programs as opposed to English language programs.

Among foreign language programs, Korean programs have the largest percentage of the total airtime. It should be noted, however, that airtime for Korean programs totals 7 hours on private terrestrial channels and only 1 hour 13 minutes on RTM. All in, Korean programs take up less than 1% of airtime on Malaysian terrestrial television. Furthermore, out of the six channels, only three—TV2, TV3 and NTV7—of the channels broadcast Korean programs. Upon closer inspection, Korean, Latin American and Thai programs share about the same amount of airtime on Malaysian terrestrial television.

Overall, on RTM, foreign language programs share about 3.4% of the total airtime, while on the terrestrial channels, they share about 4.8% of the total airtime. From these percentages alone, it is clear that there exists a very small international cultural exchange of content not reflective of local ethnicities or language heritages, at least as far as Malaysian terrestrial television is concerned.

However, it must be noted that terrestrial free-to-air television isn't the sole provider of television broadcasts. As mentioned earlier, there are also pay-TV operators, Astro and the more recent MiTV. Astro, for one, is a significant source of cultural exchange in Malaysian broadcasting. Most of its television channels are foreign owned channels from which Astro has bought broadcast rights. Out of the 47 channels offered, only eight are operated by Astro itself. The remainder 38 channels carry 100% foreign content. Even among the eight Astro-operated channels, most programs are imported from overseas. Thus, foreign programs take up most of Astro's total airtime. In view of the current status-quo, especially with pay TV stations offering foreign content, it is not surprising that local terrestrial television broadcast mainly in locally spoken languages, with an emphasis on the national language. In a sense, local terrestrial channels are providing local balance to the foreign content on television.

It must also be noted, however, that even Astro is biased towards locally spoken languages, with most of Astro's channels broadcasting programs in English and Chinese. In fact, these two languages dominate Astro broadcasts. Thus, if one were to define cultural exchange as foreign languages not spoken locally, then Astro does not facilitate cultural exchange. The relatively small broadcasting market in Malaysia coupled with audience segmentation due to the ethnically diverse population, are possible constraints to regional cultural exchange through broadcasting in Malaysia. Furthermore, Malaysian media policy favors programming that serves local media players and content that encourages the formation of national cultural identity, two things that foreign programs cannot do. Nonetheless, the prevalence of English language programming, both local and foreign (mainly American) is an anomaly. It may be related to the purchasing power that advertisers associate with English speaking viewers, and also to the success of American cultural exports. The same may be true about the prevalence of Chinese language programs.

And yet, it must be noted that these programs are mainly imported and that there is a dearth of locally produced television programs in Malaysia. Nearly all the English and Chinese programs on Astro's rights-bought-channels are foreign produced with no Malaysian input whatsoever. Even Astro's in-house channels buy most of their programs, even those in locally spoken languages, from overseas. The same can also be said about RTM and Media Prima.

In view of the current dearth of local programs, it is not surprising that Malaysian media policy aims at having at least 80% local content on television.

On the other hand, the dominance of English (mainly American) and the Chinese programs on Malaysian television is not an ideal situation of cultural exchange. For one, given the lack of Malaysian programs, it is highly unlikely that such an exchange is two-way. For another, such dominance leaves very little room for cultural products from other parts of the world, including regional neighbors such as Korea. Ironically, the main hindrance to higher Korean programs airtime on Malaysian television, is not Malaysian programs, but foreign English, and to a lesser extent, foreign Chinese programs.

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