

BACKGROUND

1 The Advisory Committee on Chinese Programmes (ACCESS) was set up in 1994 to advise and give feedback on Chinese programmes that are shown on Free-to-air Chinese TV channels so as to enhance the broadcasters' role to entertain, inform and educate the viewers.

2 This Annual Report by ACCESS covers the period April 2003 to March 2004. The current committee was appointed for a two-year term with effect from April 2003. The list of members in the committee is as follows:

- Chairman : **Professor Wang Gungwu**
Director, East Asian Institute
- Members : **Mdm Claire Chiang**
Executive Director, Banyan Tree Gallery
- Dr Chou Mei Ling**
Deputy CEO, Care Corner Counselling Centre
- Mr Chua Thian Poh**
Chairman, Ho Bee Holdings (Pte) Ltd
- Mrs Ho Woon Ho**
Principal, Nanyang Junior College
- Associate Professor Hao Xiaoming**
Associate Professor, Nanyang Technological University
- Dr Kwok Kian Woon**
Sociologist and Managing Director, Cruxible Pte Ltd
- Mr Lau Ping Sum**
Executive Director, PAP Community Foundation
- Dr Quah Sy Ren**
Assistant Professor, Nanyang Technological University
- Mr Yeo Guat Kwang**
Director, National Trade Union Congress

TASKS PERFORMED

3 Under Professor Wang's chairmanship, the Committee held four meetings during the period of April 2003 to March 2004. Dialogue sessions were also held with Channels 8 and U to update and exchange views on improving the quality of Chinese programmes.

4 The duties of the committee included the following:

- a Review and give feedback on Chinese programmes shown on Channels 8 and U;
- b Review and provide recommendations on the range and quality of Chinese programmes; and
- c Review and provide feedback on censorship issues.

OVERVIEW ON THE RANGE AND QUALITY OF CHINESE PROGRAMMES

Main Observations:

Impact of competition

5 During the dialogue sessions with Channels 8 and U, the committee was pleased to note that both channels have assured the committee that they will not compromise on the quality of content due to competition. There was also a common understanding that the quality of programmes be one of the main driving forces for advertising dollars.

6 While the committee agreed that competition has resulted in higher quality and wider range of programmes, members noted that intense competition has led to heavy losses by both parties.

7 Members cautioned that broadcasters should not be overly engrossed in competition in the local market. With little growth potential in our small local advertising market, intense competition would only bring about heavier losses to the broadcasters and result in a lose-lose situation. Instead, broadcasters should also pay attention to overseas markets and collaborate in resources, talents and capital to invest in the international market.

More creative formats observed

8 As a likely result of competition, it was observed that the broadcasters were becoming more creative in experimenting with new programming ideas and formats. For example, programmes like Channel U's 《人人爱理》"What Say You" a discussion programme held in community centres, and Channel 8's 《狮城6点半》 6.30pm news which report weekend news from public places, were able to cultivate a more intimate relationship between TV and viewers. It also provided an additional platform for people to voice their views and provide direct feedback to the broadcasters.

9 The committee also noticed Channel U, being a new channel, appeared to be more innovative in coming up with new formats and ideas. For example, Channel U came up with a new sitcom cum talkshow format with 《OK 没问题》"Ok No Problem" where the first half of the programme was a sitcom, while the second half of the

programme was in a talkshow format in which the host discussed issues that were earlier raised in the sitcom.

Observation on the Local Viewership Trends

10 Local programmes were still more popular among viewers than acquired programmes. Channel 8 was able to sustain its leading position by offering strong local programming which included popular hits such as 《荷兰村》 “*Holland V*” and 《家在大巴窑》 “*At Home With Toa Payoh*”. While the committee acknowledged such commendable efforts by our broadcasters, the channels were encouraged to leave their comfort zone to produce programmes that cater for the international market. This would not only help to bring in much-needed revenue, it would also improve programming quality and help develop a brand name for made-by-Singapore media content.

Product placements in programmes

11 There appeared to be more product placements and sponsorships in programmes which might be the result of stiff competition between the broadcasters for advertising and sponsorship dollars. Broadcasters need to consider how obtrusive the product placement was. For example, programmes such as 《Tiger 寻美食》 “*Tiger Food Adventure*” which featured the product’s name and brand are acceptable as long as the products’ names and brand are not featured prominently. However, members raised their objections to programmes such as 《我家四个宝》 “*Baby Boom*” and 《食富满人间》 “*Lets Party With Food*” which contained overt product placements and endorsements of the products that blurred the line between advertising and the storyline.

12 Broadcasters were advised to draw a clear distinction between what is considered as advertisements and sponsorships from normal programming. For example, product endorsements by the celebrities in a programme would constitute advertising and should not be allowed as this could mislead the viewers and influence their judgement of the product. Members were also concerned that the trend might encourage other sponsors to request the same treatment from broadcasters, hence leading to a vicious cycle.

OBSERVATION OF CHINESE PROGRAMMES

News Bulletins

13 There was noticeable improvement in the news bulletins on Channels U and 8. Channel 8's news team has, for the first time, ventured out from the studios to report weekend news from public places. Members noted that there was positive feedback from the public and commended Channel 8 for its efforts to bring the news closer to the public. The committee noted that Channel 8 has stopped reporting news from public places and hoped that the channel could consider reinstating the format in the future.

Current Affairs and Info-educational Programmes

14 During the SARS outbreak last year, both Channels 8 and U produced timely programmes to educate the public on the outbreak of the illness. For example, discussion programmes by Channels 8 and U such as 《前线开讲》 "Air Your Views" and 《人人有话讲》 "Everyone's Talking" provided a platform to convey important information on SARS to the masses at the quickest possible time. To cater to the elderly viewers, the channels also ran short segments in dialect which conveyed crucial hygiene issues to elderly viewers. These programmes demonstrated the broadcasters' ability to produce timely current issues. Members also applauded the channels' social responsibility in informing and educating the public in times of crisis.

15 Channel U was commended for its efforts to increase its output and offer a wider range of current affairs and info-educational programmes. For example, apart from its regular current affairs programme 《非常透视眼》 "Inside Out" that explored social issues of interest to Singaporeans, Channel U also experimented with new formats in presenting current issues. They included 《冷暖人间事》 "Sense of Being" which explored heart-warming human interest stories and 《人人爱理》 "What Say You?" which discussed the top ten news headlines.

16 The committee noted the use of re-enactments in current affairs and info-educational programmes. For example, 《冷暖人间事》 "Sense of Being" re-enacted case studies in its discussion of social issues such as child abuse or youth

delinquency. However, members cautioned that while re-enactments helped to dramatise the stories and attract viewers' attention, excessive dramatisation might sensationalise the topic and draw viewers' attention unnecessarily to the drama rather than the issue being discussed.

17 There was an increasing number of forum discussion programmes held in public places. While members welcomed the idea of greater interaction with the public, there are certain sensitive topics that might be inappropriate to discuss in the open. For example, one of the episodes of 《OK 没问题》 “*Ok No Problem*” featured an interview with a homosexual in a coffee shop. While the interviewee might have given his consent to appear on the programme, the open public setting for the interview might not be suitable to discuss such a private topic. Broadcasters were advised to exercise discretion and be sensitive to the interviewees' feelings especially while discussing issues that are very personal.

Dramas

18 There was a significant increase in local dramas shown on Channel 8 which included popular series such as 《荷兰村》 “*Holland V*” which was the longest running drama serial and topped the channel's ratings chart. The success of 《荷兰村》 “*Holland V*” also proved that local drama serials were more popular with local viewers than acquired drama series.

19 For Channel U, while acquired TVB dramas still anchored the channel's primetime slots, there were also commendable efforts by the channel to produce quality local dramas. Examples included 《家在前线》 “*Frontline*”, which was the first local drama series shot on High Definition TV format and 《天伦》 “*Together Whenever*” on the trials and tribulations of a family. Channel U also tried out different programming formats for dramas ranging from the half-hour docu-drama series such as 《人生导火线》 “*Tonight I Will Tell*” and 《转捩点》 “*Crunch Time*”, which departed from the norm of one-hour dramas, to sitcom cum talkshow format with 《OK 没问题》 “*Ok No Problem*”.

Local Cultural programmes

20 Programmes such as 《艺 TV》 “Art TV” and 《俗礼俗趣》 “Common Arts” and information segments on “Good Morning Singapore” provided insights and updates on the local arts and cultural scene while 《艺国风情》 “Arts Traveller” enabled viewers to better appreciate the arts and cultural heritage of our neighbouring countries such as Vietnam and Thailand.

21 However, members regretted that broadcasters did not make an effort to incorporate multi-racial themes in their programmes as recommended in the annual report the year before. Members strongly encouraged broadcasters to do so and suggested that these themes could be woven into the channels’ current programming.

Teens and Childrens' Programmes

22 Being the only Chinese channel that produces children’s programmes, Channel 8 has done well in producing a range of information and educational programmes that cater to our younger audience. For example, 《公孙册》 “My Grandpa and I” teaches children important values about honesty and friendship. The children also picked up simple Chinese proverbs from the programme.

23 The committee observed that there is currently a lack of programmes for pre-schoolers. Children around the age of 4 - 6 years usually have a strong capacity to recognise and acquire new languages. As such, it would be good to produce Chinese programmes catering to children of this age group to cultivate their interest in the language.

Variety Programmes

24 Channel U’s strength appeared to lie in its ability to come up with an innovative variety format that encourages public interaction such as 《全民出动抢鲜玩》 “Ready Steady Go”, 《芝麻开门客人来》 “Open Sesame” and 《全新总动员》 “Snap” etc. These programmes are popular with viewers as it helped to close the gap between the artistes and viewers and allowed viewers to participate in the games.

25 In its previous report, the committee commented that there was an increased reliance on gameshow formats which might stifle creativity and prevent the channels from coming up with new formats on their own. The committee is pleased to note that

there was an improvement in the range of variety programmes on both Channels 8 and U. While acquired format gameshows such as 《百万大赢家》 “*Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*” on Channel 8 were still very popular among viewers, the channel has also tried out other forms of local variety programmes by producing its first local format gameshow hosted by Jack Neo called 《今天谁会赢》 “*Everyone Wins.*” While the programme might not be as popular as 《百万大赢家》 “*Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*”, it was a commendable effort by the channel to feature works by local talents.

26 For acquired programmes, the committee observed that Channel 8 made an effort to telecast quality acquired drama series such as “*The Big House*” 《大宅门》 and 《走向共和》 “*For the Sake of the Republic*” Both programmes had strong storylines and convincing acting from veteran artistes.

27 Lastly, it was generally observed that as compared to last year, there appeared to be a better balance of local and acquired programming for dramas and variety programmes. For example, viewers who preferred acquired drama series could tune in to TVB dramas on Channel U while fans of local dramas could enjoy dramas with local flavour on Channel 8.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Forum Discussion Programmes

28 It was noted that broadcasters were usually concerned about the negative publicity raised over controversial themes in programmes. For example, there was some negative feedback from the public about 《一加一等于三》 “*Romance De Amour*” which featured the theme of extra-marital affairs. Instead of avoiding the public’s feedback, broadcasters could make use of this opportunity to address these issues through proper forum/discussion programmes. Such discussion programmes could be held right after the drama series to have more impact. To make it more appealing, the same artistes featured in the drama could also appear in these forum-discussion programmes and share their views on the subject matter. For example, 《OK 没问题》 “*Ok No Problem*” had a similar format, which included a discussion segment on issues that were featured in the drama segment.

Creative Programming Format

29 There was a tendency for broadcasters to bring to a ‘general’ level the standards of TV programmes to make them appealing to more viewers. In the long run, this mindset might hinder the production of more quality programmes. For example, there was a general concern that programmes that involved in-depth discussion and analysis would not appeal to the average viewer. This issue could be addressed by engaging viewers through interesting programming formats and to subtly bring in the issues for discussions. The challenge was to come up with creative ideas that would appeal to the masses but not compromise on the quality of the programme.

Local Chinese Programmes for the international market

30 Channels 8 and U should be encouraged to produce Chinese programmes not only for our local Chinese community but also for a wider audience beyond Singapore.

31 There is a difference between producing for the local and the international markets as local programmes that are popular with our viewers might not necessarily appeal to the international audience because of their strong local flavor. The same goes for programmes that are produced for the international market, which might not

appeal to our viewers. For example, one of Channel 8's co-production dramas 《奔月》 “*Moon Fairy*” was a hit in the Taiwan market but did not receive the same level of popularity with local viewers. In view of this, broadcasters might need to adopt different strategies for the local and overseas markets and to come up with universal themes and production quality that appeal to a wider audience.

32 Producing programmes with universal appeal alone is not enough as members noted that the sale of Chinese programmes are generally limited to a few key markets such as Taiwan and China and these markets are already saturated with strong players from the countries. To differentiate themselves from other competitors, local broadcasters and production companies need to identify their own programming niche that sets them apart. For example, being in a multi-racial society, local producers might be in a good position to understand the sensitivities of the different races and could produce programmes with Pan-Asian themes and perspectives. Documentaries is one possible genre that broadcasters could explore as local producers are generally strong in factual research and there is potential to adapt the programme into different languages for other markets. Co-production is another way to lend exposure to our local artistes and to gain access to international markets. Members encourage broadcasters and production houses to participate in the MDA TV Content Industry Development Scheme that helps to spur the creation of local TV content for export.

33 In addition, members noted that our local Chinese programmes are generally produced to cater mainly to the Chinese community. One reason for our local Chinese programmes to be parochial in nature might be due to the existing broadcasting framework in Singapore. Currently, the non-English channels cater mainly to their own language community, e.g. Channels U and 8 for the Chinese community, Suria for Malay viewers and Vasantham Central for Indian viewers. The English channels, on the other hand, provide programmes that generally cut across ethnic lines. As such, viewers would naturally seek cosmopolitan content through English channels and ethnic-specific content on the non-English channels.

34 Therein lies the difficulty for our Chinese programmes to travel as they have to compete intensely with similar content from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Our local Chinese programmes face the challenge of differentiating themselves from the wide range of quality Chinese programmes available in the market. To address this problem, members suggested that Channels 8 and U could leverage on Singapore's unique

multi-cultural advantage to compete effectively in the international arena. Our Chinese channels should consider developing cosmopolitan content that lends an added dimension to an otherwise mono-ethnic perspective to local Chinese programming. In fact, such a differentiated product might even appeal to non-Chinese viewers and hence attract a wider audience.

Talent

35 Talent is needed to spark creativity, which form the basic engine for the industry to develop and grow. However, members observed that there appears to be a dwindling pool of talent in the local Chinese community especially as the younger generation's interest and knowledge of the Chinese language has diminished.

36 It was encouraging to note that MDA, as well as the broadcasters, have started training courses to develop local talents in scriptwriting, acting and hosting etc. Developing local talents is a long term process and requires a concerted effort from both the broadcasters and MDA to spur talents in the local broadcasting industry. For example, exchange programmes would also help to encourage transfer of skills and expertise between local and foreign producers.

Documentaries on different races

37 Broadcasters could consider showing documentaries on the different races and schedule these programmes to coincide with the various festivals such as Hari Raya or Thaipusam etc. For example, Discovery telecast a one-off documentary on the history of Haj in Mecca during Hari Raya Haji. Such programmes allow our viewers to gain a better understanding of the various communities, which is especially important in Singapore's multi-racial context. The channels could consider producing or acquiring these documentaries.

Programmes that appeal to non-Chinese viewers

38 Besides Chinese viewers, popular local Chinese programmes such as 《荷兰村》 "Holland V" could also appeal to viewers from other races because of its universal themes and storylines. Broadcasters could consider collating ratings statistics for both Chinese and non-Chinese viewers to ascertain the potential of these untapped markets.

Broadcasters could also consider using subtitles for their programmes for non-Chinese or non-Chinese speaking viewers.

Conclusion

39 For the past three years, both Channels 8 and U have been able to leverage on their strengths to serve different viewers' needs. While the new kid on the block Channel U was able to come up with innovative programming, incumbent Channel 8 had the experience and track record to produce more traditional in-depth programmes. For the viewers, competition has also resulted in wider choices and access to greater range of local and acquired programmes for viewers.

40 While consumers might have benefited from the competition, the committee also acknowledged that it has been tough for the media industry and that broadcasters have expended huge amount of resources to compete. With the expected economic recovery, players should actively explore new strategies and opportunities to grow their business and be more creative in transforming their media products into a profit-making business.

41 One way of achieving the above was for broadcasters and producers to look beyond the local market. Due to limited resources, the government, the broadcasters as well as the production companies could collaborate and combine their resources, where possible, in their bid to conquer the international market. To do that, media players should first put their differences aside and be opened to joining forces with other parties.

42 Moving forward, members have also suggested local channels should adopt a more holistic approach where there could be integration of talents and an exchange of ideas among the different language groups to produce programmes that transcend across different language groups as well as different geographical boundaries.