

Television and the Culture of Indigenous People:

Searching for Niches

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According to a certain logic it would be correct to say that in the long run television is going to destroy the culture of indigenous people. However there are strong signs that the opposite might also be true. Television might well become a challenge and a new opportunity not only for the survival, but even for a new and exciting development of indigenous culture. The following thoughts are based on a recent experience in Indonesia where a series of workshops brought traditional artists with media experts together.

The dictatorship of ratings

Commercial television which depends on advertisements is not likely to give up a menu which serves the tastes of a metropolitan consumer society. In the big cities of newly industrialised or at least "commercialised" countries, television stations are confronted with an elite that has acquired or hopes to acquire a lifestyle which is alien to indigenous culture. Such society ideals can be found in Singapore, Tokyo, New York or Paris, but certainly not in places where indigenous traditions are still alive. Indigenous culture to these people means poverty, a world which they have left behind. Even if they wanted to go back to their village lifestyle the advertisers won't let them. They want to sell their goods, luxury goods that belong to a metropolitan world. People who don't consume industrial products are simply not interesting for advertisers. This is why television programs which portray a simple life are not normally considered suitable carriers of advertisements. Indigenous art performances usually don't bring money and are therefore rejected by the television stations.

There are of course many attempts to integrate traditional art into commercial programs.

Metropolitan taste does not necessarily mean that viewers in Jakarta prefer American, Chinese or Japanese productions rather than local productions. The television programs with the highest ratings are typically 70-80% of local production. One factor may be that the government doesn't allow Indonesian dubbing of foreign television serials. All have to be shown with subtitles, which of course, makes them less attractive. But apart from that, a familiar setting and actors with Indonesian faces are always preferable. However, these local productions are just as unrealistic in their display of luxurious lifestyles, there is just as much sex and violence as in imported programs. Where the culture of indigenous people is shown, more often than not this serves only as a contrast to enhance the superiority of metropolitan life. Protagonists tend to belong to the urban upper classes. To be rich seems to be normal, living conditions which resemble those

of 90% of the less fortunate Indonesians are marginalised. This is certainly not a climate where traditional artists can prosper. Is this the viewers' choice? Certainly some of the viewers seem to like it, as the ratings show. In Indonesia the ratings are based on diaries. Typically such diaries are placed in households where there is a telephone, and samples are taken only in the five biggest markets of the country, which means that 70% of the population who live in rural areas, as well as the low class urban people are not represented. Nevertheless these people watch the same programs. Do they have the same preferences as the urban elite from which the ratings are taken? There is strong evidence that this is not the case. In the cultural city of Yogyakarta and on the island of Bali, (no ratings are available from these two places), where there is local television, people are seen crowding around television sets whenever a traditional drama is shown. These local stations are government owned and don't depend on advertising.

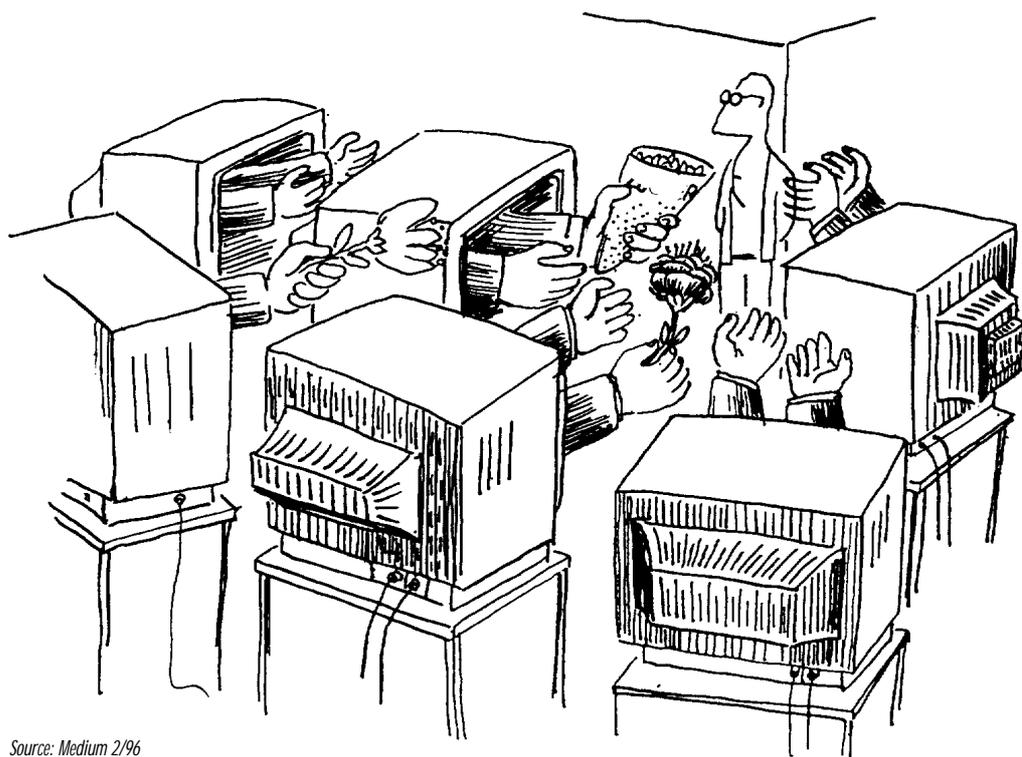
In 1981, as it was still a government monopoly, Indonesian television (TVRI) abolished commercial advertising on television. Television advertisements reappeared in great quantity with the introduction of commercial stations in 1989, and it seems that advertising will also be reintroduced to government television, since TVRI is having a hard time competing with the five national commercial stations which now exist. TVRI suffers however not only from lack of funding but also from many bureaucratic handicaps.

Possible niches for traditional art

Neither commercial nor government television are, as we know them today, ideal domains for the development of indigenous culture. Nevertheless traditional art will have to live with this situation for the time being. No fundamental change can be seen for the immediate future. In the meantime, according to an annual government census, 80% of the population have become

television viewers, whereas the average viewing time per day (according to the ratings) is 3 hours 42 minutes. Even without this statistical data we can see that it is becoming more and more difficult to gather an audience for any kind of cultural event, since more and more people get addicted to television. So it seems that there is really no other choice left. Traditional art has to find its proper place on television to survive.

Not all of a full day's programming of a given television station is equally commercial. The big money is on prime time. Therefore popular culture will have a very difficult stand indeed. Prime time is business, and business doesn't go well with popular culture unless this culture gets popularised commercially to become pop art. One of the handicaps is the star mania. Television viewers feel happy when they meet people they know, they want to see familiar faces.



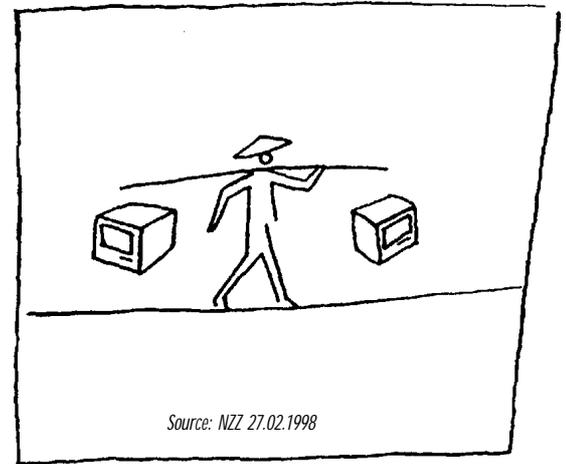
Naturally the number of familiar faces is limited. So the chosen few become celebrities. They are the stars, and it is extremely difficult for outsiders to become accepted in this privileged circle. Being a star means money. Since the producers need audiences they are willing to pay huge amounts for a star, and they can't make use of an unknown traditional artist. Of course sometimes a traditional artist can also become a star. But living his life as a star in metropolitan luxury he would soon be separated from his indigeneous culture. Indigeneous culture is very different from star business.

On the other hand Indonesia boasts a great variety of cultural forms. Besides being rooted in deep ancestral wisdom, these art expressions also provide fascinating entertainment. Many of the indigeneous dances and plays which have developed during centuries are still alive today. Some of them, e.g. the "Wayang" shadow play and its offsprings, have come into new life thanks to radio. In Yogyakarta you can listen to a "Wayang" playing every night by tuning into one station or another. Never before during the one thousand year old history of the "Wayang", was it possible to experience "Wayang" with such a frequency, not even in the sultan's palace. But now television poses new problems.

Evidently traditional art must find its place outside of prime time, in a slot where competition is less fierce and where there is not so much money involved. It is here, that television stations will be more ready to suffer financial losses for the sake of popularity among the indigeneous viewers. One of the two most popular television networks in Indonesia broadcasts a "Wayang" shadow-play every Saturday night. It starts very late when the popular shows are over. However it lasts for four and a half hours and is interrupted by very few advertisements. As the manager confesses, the owner of the station, a Chinese tycoon, personally provides the subsidies to keep this program going. He is convinced that it serves a purpose. Since ratings cannot evaluate the performance, he sends observers out to drive through low-income quarters and remote villages to ascertain from how many homes the sound of his station's shadow play can be heard. The results are overwhelming. People love it. Of course, the advertisers are still unimpressed. What can these poor people buy anyhow? The shadow play helps to improve the overall image of the network, especially when the performances are praised in newspaper articles. Other niches for indigeneous culture are local stations which are still the monopoly of the government owned TVRI, so there is something which can be done. With the great efforts of those who see it's importance indigeneous culture will work on television. If it's left to the free flow of market dynamics, indigeneous culture will certainly die, and not only the culture but the indigeneous people as well, since people can't live without culture. To let market laws regulate everything comes down to nothing less than genocide.

Searching for new formats

People who watch television for hours every day will become even more critical, not so much as regards its cultural content, but more as regards its technical perfection as an entertainment medium. Even outside of prime time, traditional art must to some extent adapt itself to television standards. This is not an easy task. On television a traditional artist has to serve several seemingly conflicting interests. First he has to convince a producer, he in turn must satisfy the demands of a television station. If the station is a commercial one, the next step will be the financing. Without any advertisements at all, the program will probably never reach an audience,



Source: NZZ 27.02.1998

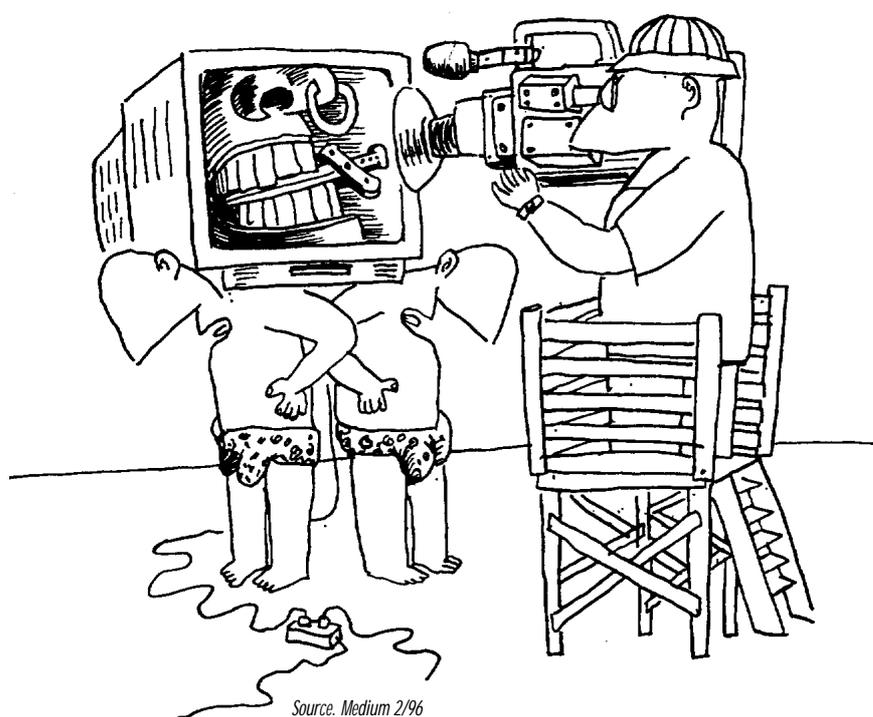
and finally, the traditional artist will have to satisfy the audience. This audience can be divided into three groups. There are the viewers, maybe even the great majority, who just want to be entertained. They don't mind whether the entertainment is of cultural value or not, but they want to be well entertained. The next group are those who are already familiar with a particular art form from live performances. They are happy to watch it on television, but they don't want to be disappointed. This group would resent it if television destroyed the art as they know it. Finally there is a relatively small group of viewers who can be considered experts. They are very critical and will react immediately if the performance breaks the rules of the tradition. Even if these viewers are not important numberwise, they are able to kill the show by writing angry articles in newspapers making the producers shy away from the experiment.

In a series of workshops which started two years ago, these challenges are discussed thoroughly between traditional artists and television people. For most of the participants this sort of encounter is a first experience. The discussions are sometimes very fierce. The aim is not only to find theoretical solutions, but also to come up with experimental productions. Five experimental programs have been produced by one local and four national television stations up to now. One national station has already broadcasted all five programs, and the other stations will follow soon.

Thanks to generous funding by the Ford Foundation for those experimental programs, television people are able to use advanced technology to satisfy their own demands as well as the demands of traditional artists. In the process traditional artists learn to make concessions. The television screen is very different from the stage they are used to. Certain things which happen on stage can't be reproduced on television, but then there are an enormous amount of new possibilities. All in all it is an exciting experience for the participants. The launching of the first five programs

was celebrated twice: in the capital and in Yogyakarta where most of the productions were made. Some of the most severe critics were invited to these events. While it was not possible to convince them all, a general agreement could be reached that the experiment is worth the effort and should certainly be continued.

This experiment is also an example of Church involvement. Some of the workshops and productions used the facilities of the PUSKAT Audiovisual Studio in Yogyakarta which belongs to the Jesuit order, and the PUSKAT staff have been chosen as the main organizer for the whole project. In Indonesia the Church can't do much on its own, the number of Catholic's being only about 3% of the population, but by collaborating with other institutions it can do a lot. Christianity is a religion of the people, and Christ is certainly an "indigenous artist" par excellence. He was in His time largely rejected by the upper classes but He was very popular among the indigenous people. Following Christ we are well prepared to help pave the way for indigenous culture on television. People of other religions notice this, and traditional artists are happy to collaborate, especially since PUSKAT refrains from using too many exclusive symbols which might frighten them.



Source. Medium 2/96