

## MALAYSIAN REALITY TV: BETWEEN MYTH AND REALITY

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### **Abstract**

The privatization policy that was introduced in 1983 by the Mahathir administration opened up the flood gates for the establishment of TV stations run on a commercial basis as well as for Malaysian media practitioners to produce more local programmes. However, most of the locally produced programmes tend to be mere copies of the western genres. The popularization of these genres is also an indicative of the process of the globalization that has taken place. Since 2000, Malaysian television industry has witnessed the mushrooming of a 'new' television genre called reality TV. The 'new' genre was popularized by the introduction of reality TV game shows, namely *Survivor* and *Amazing Race*, which received favourable response from the Malaysian audiences. Subsequently, Malaysia's first version of reality game show, *Explorace* was introduced on TV3. The phenomenon spreads rapidly in the later years. Satellite TV station Astro, on its part, has redefined and introduced a version of musical type reality TV, *Akademi Fantasia* which became a huge craze in Malaysia. Since then, more and more so-called reality TV shows within the musical programmes have inundated almost every local television channel. The study attempts to trace the development of locally produced reality TV shows and to assess this phenomenon within the context of the Malaysian television industry and within the process of globalization. Equally important, the study seeks to uncover the myth and reality of the new genre.

## REALITI TV DI MALAYSIA: ANTARA MITOS DAN REALITI

### Abstrak

Dasar penswastaan yang diperkenalkan oleh pentadbiran Mahathir pada tahun 1983 telah membuka laluan bagi penubuhan stesen televisyen swasta yang beroperasi berasaskan nilai komersial dan secara tidak langsung menggalakkan pengamal-pengamal media untuk menerbitkan banyak rancangan tempatan. Namun, sebahagian besar rancangan terbitan tempatan ini sebenarnya berkecenderungan meniru genre-genre dari barat. Populariti genre-genre yang ditiru dari barat ini juga dilihat sebagai salah satu petunjuk terhadap proses globalisasi yang berlaku. Semenjak tahun 2000, industri televisyen Malaysia telah menyaksikan perkembangan genre 'baru' yang dikenali sebagai TV realiti. Genre baru ini sebenarnya dipopularkan selepas pengenalan rancangan TV realiti berbentuk *game show*, seperti *Survivor* dan *Amazing Race* yang mendapat sambutan hangat daripada penonton Malaysia. Seterusnya versi rancangan TV realiti *game show* pertama di Malaysia, *Explore Race* diperkenalkan oleh TV3. Fenomena TV realiti ini kemudiannya berkembang dengan jayanya dalam industri tempatan. Suasana dirancakkan lagi dengan pengenalan rancangan *Akademi Fantasia* oleh stesen televisyen satellite, ASTRO. Rancangan berbentuk muzikal ini mendapat sambutan hangat dan menjadi kegilaan di Malaysia. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengesan perkembangan TV realiti terbitan tempatan dalam arus globalisasi. Seterusnya kajian ini juga bertujuan untuk melihat secara kritis aspek mitos dan realiti berkaitan genre 'baru' ini.

**Keywords:** *TV reality, myth, reality, genre, locally produced*

### Introduction

Historically, reality TV has its origin way back in 1948, when Allan Funt produced a television series called *Candid Camera*, which involves the use of hidden video camera to capture people's reactions in their everyday life. Reality TV based programmes that deals with emergency and cops stories such as *Unsolved Mysteries* (1987), *American Most Wanted* (1988) *Rescues 911* and *Cops* (1989) became fashionable product of reality TV programmes in America's television industry in the 80's. Later on, a popular programme known as *America's Funniest Home Videos* (1990) which emphasized the use of home video as a reality TV based programmes, further extended the development of reality TV show (Slocum, 2005, p. 1-2).

In the past, reality TV shows were typically associated with traditional form of factual programmes such as television news, documentary and current affairs. Nonetheless, recent development in television history has redefined the product of reality TV shows.

### **Reality TV phenomenon**

Today, reality TV is no longer confined to simply news, documentary and current affairs programmes. It was observed that rapid development of reality TV now has also incorporated other types of existing television production, making it a more 'hybrid genre' (Holmes & Jerymn, 2004; Hill, 2005 and Mast, 2009). Genre is the term used to categorize the different types or formats of television programmes which fall under clear generic categories such as news, drama, talk show, sitcoms, game show etc. with a specific code and conventions for each programme. However, the recent phenomenon associated with reality TV has created a 'blurring of boundaries' between different television genres. Reality TV does not necessarily follow specific style code and convention (styles) in its productions. Various elements of the existing genres could be utilized to produce a single production of reality TV show. Such elements make it difficult to pin down what reality TV actual is. However, it appears that most of the reality TV shows currently available, exhibit some common characteristics, which are, 'unscripted', 'documenting actual event', 'featuring ordinary people', focusing on personal experience and emotions, hybrid in nature and relatively cheap to produce.

Given this 'unique characteristic' of reality TV, defining this genre is somewhat problematic. Unlike the other traditional type of television genre, reality TV does not have an obvious generic category. This is due to that fact that reality TV can be about anything and everything, the 'catch-all categories' (Kilborn, 2002:423) about human, and animal amongst others. Hill (2005, p. 5), for instance, defines reality TV as a catch-all categories that includes a wide range of entertainment, a cross section between information and entertainment, documentary and drama. It is worth to note here that to what extent reality TV representing the real-truth, however, remained debatable.

By the turn of the new millennium, reality TV has increasingly become a fashionable product worldwide, undeniably created a phenomenal 'television culture' around the globe. The success of reality TV show was made evident after the introduction of *Survivor* (USA), in 1999 (originally known as *Expedition Robinson*, aired on Swedish television in 1997) and *Big Brother* (the Netherlands) in 2000, which borrowed a concept of an adventure, game show and drama. Around about 2002, reality TV expanded to incorporate a singing talent approach such as *Pop Stars* which eventually led to the creation of *Pop Idol*, *World Idol* and *American Idol* (2002), *Fame Academy* (2003) and many others. These formats involved a series of audition and the selected contestants performed in front of studio audience with the presence of a panel of judges. Home audience are

also 'invited to take part' as judges alongside with the studio audiences and panel judges by voting for the winners. American Idol/or its adaptation format has been one of the most successful reality TV programmes that receive a great deal of attention in almost every corner of the world and has been franchised to about 35 countries across Europe and Asian region (Baltruschat, 2009).

The development of reality TV also created a dating/relationship reality TV programmes such *Joe Millionaire*, *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, *For Money or Love* etc. The current approach in creating more reality TV programmes now embraces life experiment programmes and makeover involving ordinary people experimenting with their life in many different ways.

Reality TV developed to be the fastest growing television format globally since its debut in the late 1990s. In a commercially oriented television industry, economic factor plays a crucial role. Reality TV is inexpensive to produce. A single programme of reality TV show costs less than US\$500 for an hour, which accounts for only one-third of the cost of an hour comedy or drama (Slocum, 2005, p. 3). Slocum further pointed out that:

*"In every line of the production budget, reality-based programming is cheaper than traditional programming. Not as much equipment is needed and, it's cheaper. There is a smaller crew. There are fewer paid performers. There are fewer sets. The economic role of reality-based programming is to permit a network to cost-average down the price of programming across the entire primetime schedule"* (p. 3).

The fact that reality TV is cheap and easy to produce seems irresistible to the industry. On this note, Barker (1997) points that *"The dynamics of capitalism stem from the pursuit of profit as the primary goal and a capitalist mode of production of new commodities and new market so that capitalism is inherently expansionist and dynamic in its quest for the market"* (pp. 20-21). In this context, the old product has been re-branded, re-packaged and re-marketed, to suit the logic of capitalism. Reality TV is now been given a 'new look' that evidently becomes the most appealing global product that currently dictates world television market place. Reality TV is indeed trendy!

### **Reality TV and the world market**

Current climate and phenomenal development and reception of reality TV around the globe evidently suggests that this kind of television programmes unmistakably recognized as global media product. It is ought to be called global product due to the fact that its technology, ownership, programmes, distribution and audience operate beyond national boundaries (Barker, 1994, p. 45) and has become a worldwide trade and most successful format internationally.

Globalization in many ways plays a crucial role that helps to nurture the development of reality TV. Globalization refers to the expanding scale, growing mag-

nitude with deepening impact of transcontinental flows and patterns of social interaction and expands the reach of power relations across the globe (Held and Mc Grew, 2002:1). At the core of globalization process is interconnectedness. In this regards, Moran (2004:2) also points out that globalization involves interdependency of worldwide politics, culture and economy. Television as part of the economic phenomenon is clearly bound up with this process through the increased activity of transnational communications corporations, international co-productions and the global sale of television products (Barker, 1997, p. 22). Similarly, Waisbord (2004, p. 360) asserts that globalization has intensified interconnectivity among television industry worldwide through structural and institutional linkages which resulted in an increasingly integrated business by which profit-making is the ultimate target.

As far as distribution of reality television is concerned, America and Europe have been the key players in the programmes' trade (Kilborn, 2002). However, Iwabuchi (2004) asserts that popularity of Asian television products, namely from Japan should not be undermined. In this regard, he points out that in 1980s Japanese television products, other than animation, have successfully penetrated western market with a high trading price. It is noted that Tokyo Broadcasting System (*TBS*), the leading Japanese exporter of television product, has sold various television programmes and formats to more than forty countries. One of the formats that make its debut in the western market has been a popular quiz show known as *Waku Waku (Animal Land)*. The rights have been sold to the Netherlands in 1987 and still is one of the popular quiz shows in the country.

Interestingly, Iwabuchi (2004, p. 29) had also argued that Japanese products were also one of the pioneers in the production of reality TV. He asserts that the globally adapted format of *America's Funniest Home Videos* was originally produced by TBS, broadcasted in 1986. Three years later, in 1989 the America network ABC bought the rights to the format and eventually exported the programme to more than eighty countries. However, this format remained unrecognized as one of Japanese television products internationally.

Format adaptation or copycat television has long been a common practice in television industry. The advent in global trade of reality television products evidently has further nurtured what Iwabuchi (2004, p.28) termed as the 'culture of borrowing' where format and ideas in a television programmes/production could be copied, imitate, adapted, modified and appropriated. There are two types of format adaptation; firstly the license adaptation which imply buying the copy right of the production. The programme is replicated, then re-produced elsewhere, perhaps by adding some local tinge in order to cater to local audience. Some examples include *American Idol*, *Survivor*, *La Academia* and etc. The second type is the unlicensed format adaptation, where ideas and some parts of the production could be copied, imitate, adapted and modified accordingly. This aspect is also known as 'plagiarism' of television products. Programmes in this category is produced locally to suit local taste and meant for local consumption,

without any form of acknowledgement to the original production.

The increasing pattern in format adaptation raises question as to why the style is being obsessively subscribed by local television stations around the world? There are two winning formula for format adaptation that currently shape the outlook of the industry. Firstly, format adaptation is economical and secondly, format adaptation most of the time guaranteed high ratings (Moran, 2004; Iwabuchi, 2004; Waisbord, 2004).

It is also worth noting here that format adaptation programme is likely to be successful elsewhere if it has a universal appeal and 'cultural proximity' (Straubhaar, 2003) which means common or shared values. Programmes with universal appeal such as musical programmes could be shared and enjoy by audience all over the world and assured high ratings, which partly explain the 'Idol Phenomenon' globally.

### **The Malaysian TV industry**

Until 1963, radio was the only broadcasting medium in Malaysia. Television was officially introduced on 28 December 1963. It was a single network known as *Rangkaian Pertama (The First Channel)* and was broadcast in black and white. The introduction of *Rangkaian Dua (The Second Channel)* took place seven years later, in late 1969. According to their mission statement, the two channels should propagate government policies, promote Malaysian art and culture and provide education, general information and entertainment (Ministry of Information Malaysia: 1997). In short, the station was used as a medium to support the state policies and ideology. This facts remains till this very day. Both channels are now called TV1 and TV2. It was not until 1984 that the first privately owned television station, TV 3 ( free-to-air) was allowed to operate, which essentially broke more than twenty years of government monopoly of the broadcast medium. The Privatisation Policies that was introduced in 1983 could be said to have brought about the introduction of TV 3. When the decision was announced, the license to operate the first private television was awarded to a company that was closely link to the ruling political parties (Meor Zailan,1992; Gomez,1994).

On 1<sup>st</sup> of July 1995, a second private channel (free-to-air) known as MetroVision was introduced. As with TV3, the two biggest share holders in Metro Vision were closely connected to the ruling party. However, after operating for a few years, MetroVision had to cease operation in 2000, due to serious financial problems the station faced. Shortly, after the establishment of MetroVision, the first subscription based television network (cable tv) Mega TV was launched in late 1995. Mega TV too was shut down in 2001. In 1996, Malaysia introduced its first satellite television, ASTRO (All Asia Television and Radio Company). This was made possible by the launch of MEASAT (Malaysian East Satellite System) I and II. ASTRO is owned by Binariang Sdn. Bhd. with 85 percent share and the remaining 15 percent is owned by Khazanah Berhad, which is the investment arm of the Ministry of Information (*New Straits Times*, 15 May 1997).

A year after the introduction of satellite TV, another opening was announced to allow for the third commercial television to operate. On 7<sup>th</sup> of April 1997 Ntv 7 (free-to-air) was introduced. Interestingly the sole authorization to operate the service was given to an individual, which has a close connection with the government. The station was owned by a former Minister of Agriculture, Dato' Effendi Norwawi. The development of the Malaysian television industry was intensified with the advent of the fourth private television station known as Channel 9, which commenced telecast on 9 September 2003. Its target audience is the young generation, specifically the 15–30 years age group (*Utusan Malaysia*, 16 August 2003). Channel 9 is owned by Tan Sri Rashid Manaf through Anaza Sdn.Bhd with 51 percent share and the remaining 49 percent being owned by Datuk Muhammad Mustafa, the former chairman of Ch-9 Media Sdn.Bhd or formerly known as Medan Mas Sdn. Bhd. which in turn is the broadcast license holder of MetroVision (*Utusan Malaysia*, 13 Jun 2004). In early 2005, Channels 9 ceased its operation and was re-launch on the 22 April 2006.

Although there were already four terrestrial television stations in Malaysia, and the existence of Channel 9 has not yet properly justified, in early 2004, the government nonetheless decided to approve yet another private television station known as 8TV. According to then Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Information, Datuk Zainudin Maidin, the decision to authorize the operation of 8TV was done on the basis of free market competition (*Ekonomi*, 25 Oktober 2003). But what is more alarming is that the ownership of the fourth private channel is again closely aligned with the ruling elite.

By 2005, all local terrestrial television are owned by Media Prima Sdn. Bhd, which was established in August 2003. When 8TV was launched, the license to operate the TV station was given to Media Prima. In June 2005, Media Prima bought over Channel 9 and by October 2005, the company acquired 100 percent of the shares in Ntv7 (<http://www.answers.com/topic/media-prima-berhad>).

The development of Malaysian television industry is further intensified with the establishment of two subscription based television station, namely MiTV, own by Vincent Tan which was launched on 5 September 2005. It offers 41 channels with variety of mainly the imported programmes from America, Hong Kong, India etc (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MiTV>). In general most of the programmes available on MiTV are similar to what is currently being offered by ASTRO. In October 2006, MiTV, ceased operation, due to stiff competition with ASTRO.

The other subscription-based television is Fine TV, was launched end of December 2005, owned by Eurofine (M) Sdn. Bhd through its subsidiary company Network Guidance Sdn. Bhd, This company operates under Perbadanan Nasional Berhad, which in turn is under the control of Ministry of Finance ([http://www.eurofine.com.my/company\\_profile.htm](http://www.eurofine.com.my/company_profile.htm)). Fine TV introduces interactive subscription based TV that offers 18 channels and uses 'on demand concept' that requires the audience to order the kind of television programmes they would

want to watch.

The additional television stations are assumed by some to offer more variety of programmes to the audience. However, this paper argues, that this need not be true. The later section of the paper, map out the implications of the development of reality TV and to locate the phenomenon within the current context of Malaysian television industry and uncover the myth and reality in the local scenario.

### **TV programming in Malaysia**

After more than four decades television was introduced in Malaysia, local television industry has gone through tremendous development and changes. Starting only with one television channel in 1963, currently there are six free to air television channels and two subscription based services available. When television was first set, finding locally produced programme to fill in the air time was a major obstacle. This was due to the lack of local expertise and limited funds. Imported programmes which were available in the market at that time were seen as a solution to this problem. In this sense, Raja Iskandar, the then Head of the Programmes explained:

*“...English speaking material simply abounds in the market. It is also available as a quite low prices. On the other hand vernacular films are few and owing to the small size of the market, are expensive... Of necessity, English speaking syndicated films will be used to fill air time, with subtitles for various language speaking groups. They are useful for providing the time required by local producers to study and be acquainted with the new medium, before they venture on their own to make similar of perhaps better productions with local tinge”. (Cited in Karthigesu, 1990, p. 135).*

At the early stage of the development of Malaysian television, assurance was given by Raja Iskandar that the decision to broadcast imported programme was only a short term measure. However, previous studies (Karthigesu, 1987; Zaharom, 1996; and Noorbathi, 1996), showed that this assurance was breached as imported programmes still play an important role to ensure the operation of Malaysian television industry.

The establishment of the first private/commercial television, TV3 in 1984 has resulted in the changes of the media landscape in Malaysia. When TV3 was first established the first step taken by the station was to buy the latest and newest imported television programmes in order to attract audience (Karthigesu, 1990; Latiffah et al., 2009). In early 1990's Malaysian television industry witness the mushrooming of the locally produced programmes in response to the announcement of quota policy on television to achieved the ratio of local to imported programmes of 80:20 by the year 2000 (Ramlah Jalee, 1998) as well as making



an effort to further promote Malaysian culture (Zaharom, 1996) through homemade programmes. Interestingly, Zaharom (1996) also points out that most of the locally produced programmes such as TV magazine, drama, sitcom, musical programme were simply a plain copies of the western genres.

In the year 2000, Malaysian television industry's landscape was once again altered. Programmes from the Asean region namely Japan, Korea, Thailand, Philippines, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Indonesia and India started to claim steady position in local television scheduling (Samsudin, 2005; Juliana, 2006). This is partly in response to the proposed Asean Free Trade Area (AFTA) Agreement which compelled participating countries to open up their respective markets (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2 May 2002). Television products, from Latin America, specifically Brazil and Mexico, had also started to make an entry into Malaysian television scene. It was also observed that the copy cat phenomenon which was existed during the 1990s again resurfaced during this period of time and developed a phenomenal doorway for Reality TV (Juliana, 2007).

Reality TV gains its popularity in the Malaysian television industry with the introduction of the highly acclaimed American reality TV, *Survivor* in year 2000. After the success of the programme, Malaysia television industry has introduced its own local reality TV show, known as *Explorace* broadcast on TV3. The first season of the programme managed to attract an average of 2.3 million viewers and was billed as one of the most successful reality adventure/game show programme in Malaysia (*Utusan Malaysia*, 23 February 2005). The programme in essence involves the participants to undergo extreme challenges; and travel across the nation to find clues and solve mysteries to complete the game with the ultimate goal of winning a cash prize of RM100, 000 at the end of a series of the episode.

A turning point in the Malaysian television industry came with the creation of *Akademi Fantasia* (2003) broadcast on ASTRO. *Akademi Fantasia* is an adaptation of *La Academia*, one of the most successful musical/ singing talent reality TV show originated from Mexico (*Utusan Malaysia*, 7 August 2005). *Akademi Fantasia* involved a series of auditions. Selected twelve contestants are chosen to perform live in front of studio audience and panel of judges. For the first time ever, ASTRO through *Akademi Fantasia* has created the first interactive TV phenomenon that became a huge craze to almost every level of Malaysian society. Home and studio audience are invited to vote for their favourite contestants. Audience through short message service (SMS) vote were given a hundred percent of deciding power to determine the winner (*Utusan Malaysia*, 6 July 2005).

The first season of *Akademi Fantasia* in 2003 drew in profits through the votes made by audiences throughout the nine weeks of the show. ASTRO managed to collect 2.5 million ringgit as a profit in return for their services to entertain the audience. In 2004, 15 million SMS were sent to ASTRO, and the profit made for the second season amounted up to 7.5 million ringgit, all made possible by the voting system created for the audiences (*Utusan Malaysia*, 6 July 2005). In this

sense, Barker (1997, p. 21) points out, “while there is money to be made from the production and sale of television programme, there are also means to deliver audiences to the advertisers which in turn place television at the centre of wider commercial activities”.

Whilst *Akademi Fantasia* was at the peak of its popularity yet another reality TV show, *Malaysian Idol*, was introduced on 8TV. *Malaysian Idol* is yet another adaptation TV programme from America, known as *American Idol*, which essentially originated from Britain. The first season of *Malaysian Idol* managed to attract 3.4 million audiences and the second season in 2005 has pulled 15 million viewers (*Utusan Malaysia*, 21 September 2005). *Akademi Fantasia* and *Malaysian Idol*'s sensation has encouraged other media operator to subscribe to the same formula to produce more reality TV product of the same nature. This subsequently led to the creation of *Who Will Win* (2004) and *Audition* (2004) which were broadcast on Ntv7, *Malaysian Top Star* (2004) was on 8tv and *Mentor* on Ntv7 (2005).

The proliferation of a variety of reality TV show with the same format obviously was done in order to compete for audience market share. Interestingly, while ‘Idol Mania’ has been a phenomenal success in other parts of the world, in March 2006, the 8TV CEO, announced that *Malaysian Idol* will not be aired for the third season and will be replaced by a locally produced programme, *One in a Million*, which put up a similar show ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malaysian\\_Idol](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malaysian_Idol)). Although the rationale to withdraw *Malaysian Idol* was not revealed, it is believed that the decision to discontinue the *Idol* programme, is likely to have to do with the economic reason whereby adapting similar programme would be more cost effective in the long run in comparison paying for the licensed programme.

Apart from growing number of talent search reality programmes, the development of reality TV shows in Malaysia also expanded to other type of sub genres. Programmes such as *Misi Suara Hati* (2004), *Bersama Mu* (2005) took a documentary approach to portray the everyday life of the unfortunate people in Malaysia. Audience are encouraged to make a donation through SMS to help improve the lives of the unfortunate and the needy. *Mencari Cinta* is yet the other version of Malaysian reality TV programme about relationship, which is again a plain copy of the American reality TV programme, *The Bachelorette*. *Mencari Cinta* has created much excitement amid controversial as it was accused of being daring and bold in presenting men-women relationship (*Utusan Malaysia*, 6 August 2005). Criticism of the programme addresses the issues of the inappropriateness of the content of *Mencari Cinta* which portrays ten male contestants who compete with each other to win a lady's heart. The programme is perceived as unsuitable for the culture and moral practice of the Malaysians, especially amongst the Muslims. After the first season of *Mencari Cinta* the programme was terminated.

It is evident that current local scenario of the television industry, shows that

competition among television stations for audience ratings are becoming more intense. Reality TV phenomenon that swept local industry in the late 1990s has encouraged more locally produced programmes being aired. Reality TV, the 'catch all categories' has inundated almost every local television channel. Some of the more recent reality programmes are: *One in a million* (2006), *Sehati Berdansa* (2007), *Gadis Melayu* (2008), *Wakanabeb!* (2009), *Tangkap Muat* (2010) and many more, from various sub genres, with licensed and unlicensed adaptations. Alongside locally produced programmes, there are also a number of imported reality TV programmes currently occupying Malaysian television scheduling.

### **Between myth and reality**

A close look at the reality TV phenomenon, suggests that this kind of programme does not necessarily come from the west as it could also be originated from the east. Format adaptation or copy cat trend that has long been in existence can be seen as one of contributing factors to the popularity of reality TV as global television product. The fact that reality TV programmes are relatively cheap to produced and often time guarantee high ratings, undeniably influence television industry around the world including Malaysia to obsessively subscribe to the same television product. In local scenario, the development reality TV programme in general sense could be seen as nourishing the industry with variety of television products as well as providing a new television experience for local audience and therefore have a positive impact on local industry. However an analysis of the current development of reality TV, interestingly revealed a different picture altogether.

At a glance, it appeared that most of the reality programmes have a local source, and hence, should be regarded as the original products of Malaysia. The proliferation of variety types of homemade programmes, on one hand gives the impression that the industry is becoming more matured and there have been an advancement in the skills and creativity in the local production. Sadly, this kind of television programmes in actual fact are heavily adapted/copied and domesticated for local consumption. Most of the locally produced reality TV programmes in Malaysia are mere replicas of other programmes from other parts of the world. Some programmes are licensed adapted and mostly are unlicensed adapted. What is evident, reality TV programmes, has further encourage the act of adapting/copying and appropriating other foreign television products rather than stimulating innovation and creativity in local industry.

Quota policy pertaining to television content has been part of the reason why format adaptation is becoming more and more common within local television industry at present time. Quota policy, meant for reducing imported programmes and promoting local programmes in the light of protecting 'local culture and values'. Fear over foreign culture displacing 'local culture' has long been dwelling among certain quarters of the Malaysian population, from the general public

to the high level authority. For instance with the intensification of 'culture borrowing' (Iwabuchi, 2004) in television in industry in Malaysia, the Deputy Prime Minister was reported to voiced out his uneasiness over local programmes that "borrow extensively from western culture" that might have "a negative impact on viewers because some if the action wandered from the norm of local culture" (*The Star*, 3 August 2005).

Such concerned undoubtedly influence more local broadcasters to resort to locally produced programmes partly to ensure that they stay in the good book of the authority whilst making profit for the industry. In this regards Waisbord (2004, p. 363) points out that "Programming quotas have loopholes that allow foreign ideas (rather than foreign shows) to enter as long as they are produced domestically. Format programming, then is part of the business strategies to bypass local programming quotas".

Prior to the advent of reality TV programmes, watching experience had always been a one way activity whereby audience exposed themselves to television programmes for entertainment and obtaining information. With the arrival of reality TV, audience were introduced to a new way of experiencing television culture. Known as interactive television, audience are given a privilege to determine the outcome of the programmes.

The interactive television experience was first initiated by ASTRO through *Akademi Fantasia*. Following the same foot step were *Malaysian Idol*, *Mentor* and few other musical/talent reality TV shows. These kind of programmes encourage home audience to cast in their vote in order to decide the winner for each programme. In this regard, audience are treated as an important factor and is essential to ensure the success of the programme. The right to vote in this respect can be seen as providing a sense of 'freedom' and 'democracy' to the audience. Unfortunately, the analysis shows that the form of empowerment created through voting system on television within Malaysian context is only applicable to certain types of programmes, namely entertainment vis-a-vis safe media products. If anything, this aspect simply reinforces the idea of pseudo-democracy, which in actual fact works as long as they are non-threatening and do not question the state ideology.

On one hand the proliferation of reality television programme in Malaysia such as *Explore Race*, *Akademi Fantasia*, *Who Will Win*,

## **Conclusion**

It is evident that the existence of Reality TV in Malaysia is clearly subject to the commercial orientation and market pressure. Initially, after the establishment of TV3, all television stations were 'forced' to compete utilizing the latest and newest imported programmes to draw more audiences in order to maintain its popularity. By 1990s, local television industry has seen an increase amount of homemade programmes occupying television scheduling; however, research findings indicated that many of these programmes were apparently a mere copycat

products, typically from the western genres.

With the development of reality TV, it was observed that the trend in imitating other programmes is becoming more and more common. With the intensification of format adaptation as a result of globalization process around the world, reality TV show has undoubtedly been a staple diet for local television industry. This is mainly due to the fact that this kind of programme is relatively cheap to produce and most of the time is appealing to the audience. The fact that quota policy in Malaysia favour local programmes over the imported ones, this has obviously further stimulates the 'culture of borrowing'. Comparatively, buying copyrights for foreign programmes can be an expensive affair than producing certain types of local programmes. Easy solution for avoiding such a high cost for purchasing the copy rights, is by plainly 'plagiarising' other programmes. The proliferation of many adapted reality TV programmes could also be that the industry now simply lack of creativity. With more channels currently operating in Malaysia and more broadcast hour available, the condition is becoming extremely demanding, hence influencing the industry to opt for programmes that does not require far-reaching effort. Adapted programmes are indeed the solution. With a slight twist to the existing programmes, a 'new programme' can be produced within a short period of time to fill in the time slot at a low production cost.

Interactive activity, such as voting system offered by many reality programmes in general sense, creates the notion of consumer sovereignty; whereby power reside in the hands of the audience. Such enticement should not be mistakenly seen as liberating the audience, instead it should be seen as a means for delivering audience to advertising, which in turn generates income for television industry. Reality TV as a global product clearly is bound up with complex interplay of capitalist ideology where profit-making is the ultimate goal of the industry. The very fact that reality TV is economical and has a mass appeal, it is certainly pleasing to the industry and is likely to continue to be a popular television product for a long time.

Capitalistic industry on one hand seems to produce a variety of programmes, which in actual fact create false impression as close analysis of the reality TV phenomenon suggests that many of these programmes are essentially involved in re-branding, re-packaging and re-marketing of the existing television genres which did not offer a different variety to Malaysian audience. In this respect, programmes are becoming more homogenous and Malaysian audience are now further experiencing the same 'television culture'.

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