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Games We Play
On Singapore Telly

In the mid 1990s, Singapore opened its doors to the international broadcasting community. The past four years in particular have seen steady policy-driven liberalisation of its print, television and multimedia industries. This has jumpstarted the local TV production industry and stimulated terrestrial network competition. While the two terrestrial TV networks compete voraciously for a small, fragmented, multilingual and increasingly sophisticated domestic TV audience, the localisation of international TV game show formats like Millionaire and The Weakest Link appear as attractive solutions to consolidate and build the audience base. TV gameshow formats have become one of the ‘formatting’ strategies that this industry employs to develop ‘local knowledge’ and ‘position’ themselves in the battle for audience ratings and eyeballs. This article will present findings and offer new insight into the impact of TV formats on the local television production, programming and audiences in Singapore. Local television production has begun to examine new avenues for content - everything can be formatted in today’s love-affair with reality TV - even the human tragedy of SARS. Key concepts used include ‘local knowledge’, ‘positioning’ and ‘formatting’.

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Recent studies on the popularity of TV formats across Asia have shown how global trends offered ‘quick-fix’ and flexible solutions, to boost audience ratings and deal with an increasingly competitive multichannel environment (see Keane and Moran, 2003). During the period of 2000-2003, almost every television industry in the Asian region had tried its hand at re-versioning game shows. Globally since the early 1990s, television industries have sought to reinvent themselves continuously in order to remain relevant to audiences’ ever-changing interests, spurred by the explosion of information and entertainment services, courtesy of media globalisation and the Internet. Asia is no different as television stations from India, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan to South Korea have taken keenly to the latest global ‘fad’ - adapting TV formats, in particular formatted game shows¹ - as the Midas touch for ratings success.
Formatted game shows are used in the sense described by Moran (1998) to define industrial formats: those licensed or adapted from well-known licensed TV programs using a fixed ‘recipe’ and series of production stages, schedules, expertise and software. These are exportable and exchangeable across national borders for a fee.

Industry insiders believe that just about anything can be formatted for television — from game shows, music videos to drama serials — with varying degrees of difficulty but the most popular tend to be game shows. This does not mean that other television content cannot be formatted. Recently, in Singapore television formatting has raised to yet another level to incorporate a recent epidemic health hazard — the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) outbreak that spread from Southern China to parts of East Asia, which has raised local television ratings even further. Television formatting allows global knowledge and information to be easily transferred not only to media producers in the form of cultural technology (Moran, 1998) but also allows local television stations to use their institutionally-endorsed pedagogic role to simultaneously disperse public service information and re-engage with their audiences as citizens-cum-consumers.

Adapting formats from Europe and America re-activates cultural imperialism, re-shapes ‘the field of production’ of Singaporean television and enables local industry to creatively respond to global trends. Intense competition across multi-channel platforms and volatile audience taste feed Singapore’s television industries’ frenzied are moving away from simply carbon-copying of successful international programming towards customised formatting.

This article explores Singapore’s television industries’ pro-active responses to global trends of international formatting and the recent impact of SARS. Firstly, it will briefly outline the history of Singapore broadcasting and relevant media policy changes that led to gradual media liberalisation. Then, it examines how Singapore’s selective uptake of television game show formats is translated through two distinct segments of production: industry competition among media producers and local consumption. Thirdly, the article will examine briefly audience reaction to local versions of successful overseas game shows through dedicated Internet discussion forums. Singapore’s on-line communities provide robust debates that interrogate the quality of foreign adaptations versus local TV production formats. Singapore provides a unique example of how new technologies and formats are articulated into a cultural base, adding to rather than reducing the ‘essence of a national or ethnic culture’ (Ansah, 1988: 18). Finally, it will conclude with a snapshot of the recent impact of
SARS on the Singapore field of television production, in terms of how local television stations extended their formatting strategies to include social issues like SARS. This article suggests that Singapore’s unique field of television production may challenge its media producers to adopt creative solutions that address the didactic role of television in Asia in order to capture the diversity of its viewers’ experiences.

**Singaporean telly: Formats and game shows**

Starting with Moeran (2001)’s conceptual use of Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘field of cultural production’, a metaphor for ‘a set of possibilities...as the site of particular forms of capital and particular narratives’ (Webb, Schirato and Danaher, 2002: 68), his study of Japan’s advertising industry sketches out a hierarchy of power that defines a network of social relations that impact upon cultural production and shape outcomes. He believed that different stages in the circuit of culture are equally important and related (Moeran, 2001: 23) such that each TV production is an intersection of related ‘fields of production’.

Furthermore, the increasingly competitive nature of Asian media industries suggest that Asian television productions can be viewed as a ‘field of strategic outcomes’ by social actors like media producers, institutions and audiences. Each TV production then is shaped by the interplay between its specific industrial and organisational contexts, and interactions of social actors involved in the field of TV production to affect the type of ‘media forms and messages [that] are produced’ (Moeran, 2001: 28). TV programmes are not simply realities dictated by corporate decisions and market forces. The concept of a ‘field’ supports theoretical positions that examine cultural productions as results of everyday agency and the making of cultural meanings (Du Gay et al, 1997, Featherstone, 1991).

Singapore’s response to media globalisation by delivering original content through TV formatting needs to be seen as more than just a chance or opportunistic response to global flows. While the influence of Western culture continues to impact on Singapore’s film, television and music industries, the process is extremely complex. In seeking to move beyond framing these trends as merely responses to cultural/media imperialism, Clifford Geertz’s (1984) concept of ‘local knowledge’ is useful. Originating from anthropology to stress the importance of understanding the local context, populations, and practices that define and measure changes in culture, ‘local knowledge’ allows us to examine local adaptations of global templates such as television game shows and other light entertainment formats.
The definition of game shows used to analyse TV programming schedules is drawn from the work of Anne Cooper-Chen (1993) and Albert Moran (1998). Cooper-Chen offers the following definition: “A program featuring civilian, that is non-celebrity, contestants who compete for prizes or cash by solving problems, answering questions, or performing tasks following prescribed rules.” (Cooper-Chen, 1993: 16).

Moran inserts a nation’s culture into the definition as he distinguishes between ‘short form’ TV game shows (quiz shows which tend to have few national traits) and ‘long form’ TV game shows (that combine games with a variety style of ‘light entertainment’). Producing local programmes stimulate the producing of ideas, arguments and discussion among audiences not simply as consumers but as citizens (see Hartley, 1999). When audiences applaud, criticise and challenge the values of local productions, they showcase the ‘psyche’ of a country’s television culture is shaped through the conflict and interaction of cultural policies, market realities, and audience preferences.

Therefore, local game shows are the ideal vehicle to explain the appeal and popularity of ‘TV formatting’ for media owners, producers and audiences alike. Industrially, they are easily replicated on a daily or weekly basis across a television schedule to amortise production costs over time, and producers face shortened planning cycles as formatted productions have stringent organising principles that nevertheless reflect the tensions of mixing global templates with local knowledge to create a range of hybrids that are easily acknowledge as local content. For audiences, time-specific cultural issues are readily inserted as texts into cultural spaces of formatted shows.

**Impact of local knowledge**

While some studies have focused on the growth of cross border television in Asia (Thussu, 2000; Chan, 1996; Lee, 1980; Goonasekera and Lee 1998), these are understood as nationalistic and ‘negative’ reaction to media imperialism (Schiller, 1991; MacBride and Roach, 1989). The validity of media imperialism has been criticised over time (see Tomlinson, 1991; Fejes, 1981; Tracey, 1988; Reeves, 1993) even while it continues to be championed by Asian governments of countries like Singapore and Malaysia when promoting ‘Asian values’ (see Chua, 1998). An alternative approach is to examine the proactive role of industry development strategies that encourage particular Asian cultural formats and genres circulate more successfully within parts of Asia than Western cultural products (Carver, 1998). The
blending of local knowledge of tastes, cultures, and language with the higher production values that are found in globally successful productions are fast becoming the benchmark across Asia, such as the rapid circulation of Japanese anime and popular drama, Korean and Taiwan dramas, music and pop-stars (Ming, 2002; Alford, 2000), Hong Kong martial arts films and the new pan-Asian cinema (see Yeh and Davis, 2002; Beals and Platt, 2002; Kim, 2001) in East Asia.

Writers such as Appadurai (1990) and Sinclair, Cunningham and Jacka (1996) reject the simplistic centre-periphery models proposed by media imperialists. In fact, global trends intersect with local practices to create disjunctive local patterns of production and consumption (Appadurai, 1990) while those media producers from similar geo-linguistic communities who are able to harness local knowledge are better positioned to capitalize on global consumer trends both in Asia and the West (Sinclair et al, 1996; Chadka & Kavoori, 2000). I argue that ‘local knowledge’ as a key driver in defining how specific cultural translations of global formats for TV game shows are shaped not just by structural features of the Singapore broadcasting industry and ideological framework set by local media policy but also by the demands of local audiences and conditions.

Bridging the culture divide:
Multiculturalism and Singapore telly

To understand Singapore’s television industry’s changes, we need to describe its material context. Singapore is a small island-state inhabited by 4.13 million² people with a multi-racial population base, a highly literate and often bilingual workforce held together by a multi-lingual policy. Singapore’s multi-racial population descend from the Malay Peninsula, China, the Indian sub-continent and Sri Lanka³ and Singapore’s official languages are Malay, Chinese (Mandarin), Tamil and English. As a direct result of the multilingual and multicultural policies at Singapore’s inception, television broadcasting (like all other domestic media) is available in all four official languages in Singapore.

While Singapore actively positions itself as a forward-looking global city-state steeped in modernity, it does so in a style of state economic planning that affects every aspect of economic and social life (see Hing, 1999) with some unforeseen social consequences. Ever mindful of its multicultural policies, local television plays a continued pedagogic role but like telecommunication services, is facing ‘managed liberalization’ (Kuo, 1994), and the current ‘field of Singapore television production’ is the outcome of ongoing
historical and structural change, and intersecting everyday life multiculturalism impacts every facet of production. However, while local television programmes refer to nation-building themes that embody discourses of ‘Asian values’, multi-racial harmony, familial ties and multicultural representation, Singapore’s television industry constantly faces the challenge of balancing nation-building with the more pragmatic requirement of competing in a multi-channel and multi-media environment. The domestic industry operates in a marketplace that demands novelty and diversity in order to attract increasingly fragmented and media-savvy audiences. In this environment, domestic broadcasters are compelled to use local knowledge of audience tastes to blend, syncretise and adapt international programmes. This presents dilemmas for broadcasters who have to consider carefully even in selecting the language when adapting TV formats which offers broadcasters the opportunity to leverage on the global brand of overseas productions to attract audiences.

Where the games began…

Singapore television sought to keep up with global technological changes. Television was introduced in February 1963 with three channels by 1967. The Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) was formed in 1980 to improve the quality of radio and television programming. SBC was corporatised and revamped twice in 1994 and 1999 (see Ramanathan and Krishnan, 1999). These structural factors, as well as changes to broadcasting, technology and information policies, shape the way that the ‘field of television production’ has developed in Singapore.

Industry practices in Singapore’s media landscape are shaped by the current television ownership system. The nine terrestrial television stations are controlled by just two large local media networks, Media Corporation of Singapore (MCS) and SPH MediaWorks (MediaWorks). MCS manages Channel 5 (mass entertainment English language channel), Channel 8 (local Mandarin language channel), MediaCorp News (operating Singapore’s international news channel, ChannelNews Asia), Suria (the Malay language channel), and a three-tier specialty channel comprising of Kids Central (children’s programming belt), Vasantham (Tamil language belt) and Arts Central (culture and arts programming belt). MediaWorks is the other local terrestrial player that recently began operation in 2000, and operates Channel i (mass entertainment English-language channel) and Channel U (mass entertainment Mandarin-language channel). The government institutions continue the practice of managed liberalization as MediaWorks, which was awarded the second ever terrestrial TV
license, is a subsidiary of Singapore Press Holdings, the nation’s monopoly newspaper and publishing group which is closely toes the state lines regarding ownership of publishing.

The total Singapore market for television viewers is dominated by four entertainment channels (SBA press release, 2002). In 1999, MediaCorp Singapore channels (Channels 5 and 8) dominated the television market with the English Channel 5 and Mandarin-language Channel 8 respectively. This fragmented with the introduction of Media Work’s English language TV Works (now Channel i) and Mandarin-language Channel U. It sets up a new field of industry competition where Channel 5 competes with Channel i, Channel 8 up against Channel U.

Both ACNielsen and Taylor Nelson Sofres TV ratings’ weekly reach for Singapore showed that the overall television audience reach expanded from 77.3% in June 2001 to about 90% in March 2001. This is partly due to the impact of competition, compelling the four channels to generate a great deal of innovative publicity that has in turn stimulated audience interest. This dramatic increase in viewers appears to vindicate the media liberalization and competition policies directed at the terrestrial broadcasting sector.

Historically, changes in Singapore’s broadcasting services reflect rapid responses to global communication trends. This uptake of technology, often in the name of national progress, has implications for broadcasters. It forces local industries to compete internationally by extending beyond traditional TV platforms to aggregate audiences that consume TV with Internet use. Local TV broadcasters and audiences embrace the use of new media (such as entertainment portals and internet forums) for their own commercial and personal aims. But at the same time the local industry also faces the challenges of a fragmenting domestic TV market. The entry of pay TV in 1995 with Singapore Cable Vision (SCV), and the launching of a second terrestrial network broadcaster, MediaWorks in 2001 significantly reshaped the field of production in a market where local players have traditionally obtained their revenues through subscription and advertising (Ramanathan and Balakrishnan, 1999). In this new environment local television industries are forced to explore new revenue models as well as strive to maintain a share of the fragmenting television audience pie.

The ‘reconstituted’ field of television production had the effect of jumpstarting local production in 2001. At a time when media players were increasingly cautious and anticipated a huge drop in advertising revenue, the intense competition for audiences domestically and regionally became more acute. National broadcasters in the Asia-Pacific region quickly searched for cost-cutting measures - including regional collaboration and formats -
to reduce the key cost centres of local production (Television Asia, 2002). From this perspective, a significant environmental condition such as the depressed regional economy has played a key role in the decision to embrace formatting as a local industry strategy.

**Television formatting strategies**

Local television has recently seen most activity in light entertainment genres, stimulated by the adaptation of the worldwide hit quiz show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* (hereafter *Millionaire Singapore*).

The first adaptation was broadcast in English on Channel 5 and the second adaptation was in Chinese mandarin in Aug 2001 on Channel 8. Since then, both MCS and MediaWorks have tried to harness the global wave of game show formats that began in the late 1990s. In fact, prior to this, only one locally produced game show had been adapted from overseas formats – *The Pyramid Game* in Singapore. It was shown leading up to the 7pm news on Channel 5. It is important to point out that broadcasters introduced game shows into prime time schedules when competition intensified. In effect, the increasingly competitive field of television production in Singapore, largely resulting from a combination of audience expectation and multi-channelling, has accelerated the scheduling of game shows, as well as other format adaptations, into prime time schedules. In the period from 2000-2002 other game shows like *Wheel of Fortune* and *Celebrity Squares* have been added to the slate of localisation of Western TV formats that are the rage now on prime-time TV.

To map out how the phenomena of ‘TV formatting’ in Singapore has accelerated change in its field of television production, let us illustrate the extensive range of TV production strategies that have flourished which focuses on game shows and variety shows that appeared since 2001.

One type of production strategy involved cultural adaptation of internationally licensed TV formats from West to the East such as licensed adaptations of two kinds. Firstly, there were locally adapting studio-based game shows such as *Russian Roulette, Brainedest Kid / Mother/etc, Wheel of Fortune, Pyramid Game*. Secondly, there were acquired reality shows TV with participatory mechanisms allowed local viewers to SMS their votes for their favourites or dedicate messages, shows like dating games such as the American versions of *The Bachelor2, The Bachelorette and Joe Millionaire* and talent shows such as *Star Search, 30 Seconds to Fame* and *American Idol 2*. All of these occurred on MediaCorp Channels 5 and 8.
A second type of production strategy involves syncretisation that involve juxtaposing local game shows with acquired Western (from USA and Europe) and Eastern formats (from Japan and Taiwan) through splicing promotional trailers that use images of well-known American formats such as *The Amazing Race* 4 and mixed these with local English-language game-cum-food shows to promote new local travelogue shows such as *Wow Wow World* (on Channel 5) in June 2003, and cashing in on the current craze for Taiwanese idol pop dramas already familiar with past Hollywood teenage series like *Beverly Hills 90210* with *Feel Good 100%* (on Channel U) and *Light Years* (on Channel 5) in 2003. Yet another example occurred in December 2002 when Singapore was featured on *The Amazing Race* 3’s world racing map and the competing teams crossed paths with local sitcom television character, *Channel 5’s Phua Chu Kang* creating a mixture between reality gameshows and sitcoms.

However, in a really competitive streak, a third type of production strategy emerged which involved local experiments in hybridisation for both studio-based and reality (outdoor) games where local content mixed with regional formats such as *Show Me Your Power* on Channel U (a version of *Dog Eat Dog* game show-cum-Taiwanese variety show) while other programmes dovetail a few famous global templates with local content/slant such as *Everyone Wins* (Robert Chua’s answer to *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*) on Channel 8. Some are original local reality shows ‘updated’ to look like globally recognisable formats such as *Wow Wow World* (a la *Amazing Race*-cum-food show) on Channel 5 which debuted 20 Jun 2003, and *Amazing Australia* (a la *Survivor*-travelogue show of two competing teams travelling around Australia) on Channel 8 which was telecast in April-May 2003.

All these emerging production strategies that use TV formatting reflects the progressive interaction between local knowledge and global culture flow.

**Positioning Channel 8 against Channel U**

Through bring the local knowledge of industry and audiences to bear on Singapore telly, the following example demonstrates how rival Singapore broadcasters use formats to affect change in the field of TV broadcasting.

During MediaWorks’ (Mandarin) Channel U’s launch in May-July 2001 the station offered programming as rival Mandarin-language channel MCS’s Channel 8, in effect cannibalising each other’s schedules which made it difficult to ‘position’ these two channels in the competitive field of Singapore television. This
confused advertisers and audiences alike. Channel surfing viewers tended to remark that switching between the two channels was like ‘deja vu’. With MCS’s first mover advantage, Channel 8 held a stronger position with the larger share of the total Mandarin-language viewing audience base given its long history starting from way back in 1963 (Birch and Phillips, 2003: 53). This changed when MediaWorks’ Channel U slowly closed the gap in audience ratings from 55.8 percent in Jan 2002 to 56.4 percent in March 2002 (see SBA, 2002), especially on prime-time.

In 2001, Channel U’s early program line-up started with a mixed bag of original reality-style game shows such as Youth Quest (rival student teams to confront physical challenges), and Exchange Lives (Singapore families ‘house swap’ for one week with other families from countries in the Asia-Pacific) with Channel 8. These experiments were short-lived.

Late in 2001 onwards, MediaWorks’ Mandarin-language Channel U started to use a strategy of creating original ‘long form’ game shows such as Wow Wow West (an hour-long variety infotainment show that began in mid-July 2002) scheduled on a Saturday slot. This reflected a desire by MediaWorks to compete with MediaCorp Singapore Channel 8’s version of The Weakest Link, another hour-long game show broadcast on Sunday nights. However, SPH press coverage of The Weakest Link (which might be construed as competitive tactics), and some MCS’ online forum threads indicate that it lacks the appeal of Millionaire Singapore.

Adaptations may need to make significant adjustments even to tried and tested international television formats which reflect significant cultural differences from the original source. The hallmark of the UK original is the stern quiz-masterly tone of the host which received an equally cold reception on Channel 8:

“THE WEAKEST LINK has got to be the unfriendliest TV game show. Nobody smiles - not the eight grim contestants, and definitely not the stern host Tsui Li-hsin. Even the audiences, who are seated around a circular set, barely applaud on this homegrown version of the syndicated game show from Britain...Dressed in sombre black without even a smile to brighten her outfit, Tsui has obviously been drilled by the same instructors as Anne Robinson, the original acerbic British host, and frosty actress Carol Cheng, who helmed Hong Kong’s Cantonese version...” (Sng 2002).

Interestingly, the English language adaptation did much better when broadcast on Channel 5 often among the top 10 programmes of the week. The difference could again be one where the signature dry wit and sarcasm of ‘culturally odourless’ English was better received by the English-speaking and multicultural audiences as pure entertainment.
Audiences/citizens speak up…

Ratings and audience feedback on game shows in Singapore suggest local adaptations attract stronger viewership when articulated into ‘culturally odourless’ televisual spaces. This explains to some extent why some global templates fare better on the English-language channels than non-English ones. Certainly, Singapore language policies encourage the use of English as a cultural site for all language communities to converge for commerce and efforts to define a public space for national culture. However, game shows that are translated from Western formats into local English shows become successful because of their careful blend of familiar game show structures, celebrity hosts, local faces, besides using the English language - accessible to all kinds of Singaporean audiences.

“Why is the hit Singapore edition of ‘Who Wants to be a Millionaire’ must-see TV?” 1. Watch it so that you can hold the “hottest topic” with your friends 2. So you can be encouraged by the courage of some contestants who are bold enough to brave national TV when apparently they have not read enough. 3. So you can judge for yourself if you are bold (and knowledgeable) enough to brave national TV for your possible 1st million.” - 8 Days Online Forum.

Nevertheless, this linguistic policy is not without its problems. even something as apolitical as a game show can become a site for grass-roots political engagement. Interpretations of Singapore’s multicultural policy turned up on an online discussion thread concerning Channel 8’s Mandarin language version of Millionaire Singapore: “Please can MediaCorp TV or the sponsors confirm if they will have Malay and Tamil versions of Who Wants To Be A Millionaire now that they are launching the Chinese version? If not, why not? It would not be fair to the non-Chinese speaking population of Singapore, as then the show should be called ‘Which Chinese Wants To Be A Millionaire’. Otherwise they should keep the whole show in English only.” - Mrs Mouse 2001 (MediaCorp TV Channel 5, 2001)

Such discussions on MediaCorp Singapore’s (MCS) online communities have had results, testifying to the role played by online communities as an instrument of program quality regulation. During MCS’s second season of Millionaire Singapore, a ‘Multiracial Special’ telecast on 13 April 2002, which was ranked fifth on the Top 10 list that week.

Local television’s public service roles present another set of challenges for media producers with media watchdogs like the Programme Advisory Committee and ACCESS (Advisory
Committee on Chinese Programmes), and institutional markers set by the four key national values of communitarianism, religious tolerance, family values and consensus (see Quah, 1990). Singapore’s media producers often have to create Asian media productions that use the global hype of ‘reality TV’ games to redesign their older ‘live-action’ entertainment programmes, without resorting to sex or colourful language to sensationalise local television. Sometimes, they even try to do so with real social issues.

Armed with the flexibility of formatting strategies from television game shows to reality TV, a nation’s key cultural moments can be inserted easily into formatted productions that rework and repackage social issues and national events for public consumption. The next and final section will highlight how current social or health issues like SARS can be (and has been) formatted easily in the field of Singapore television production to reinforce local television’s role of mediating between state and citizen, media producers and media audiences.

Formatting the Singapore field: SARS and television

Lauded by the World Health Organisation for its ‘fast and efficient’ style of public containment and treatment of the SARS epidemic, this small nation-state has reinforced its governmental reputation yet again for leaving little to chance. Culture and the media were also enlisted to help the island-city battle the mental and psychological war against SARS such that Singapore’s televisual landscape has also seen a few significant changes courtesy of SARS.

SARS has affected (temporarily at least) the way television viewing has become simply an ‘idiot box’ and paradoxically restored its place in the home, not simply as an entertainment medium but restoring its pedagogic role through health and educational pursuits. This has of course increased local TV viewership ratings rising at least 10-15% since before the SARS crisis, especially for local English dramatic programmes. For example, the debut episode of True Courage (an English-language docudrama series based on personal stories of Singapore SARS patients) debuted on 3 June 2003, garnering 430,000 household viewers and topping the week of 1-7 June 2003, close to the top programme The Matrix (R) at 467,000 viewers the week before of 25-31 May 2003. This is significant as, besides local sitcoms, very few local English-language dramatic programmes top ratings on the English channel dominated usually by Hollywood.
blockbusters. Singapore’s regional news channel has also benefited: “Channel News Asia’s SARS-related specials drew more than 1.4 million Singapore viewers, aged 15 and above. This pushed Channel NewsAsia’s average daily reach in April for these viewers to 24%, the highest recorded in the past year, compared to a monthly average daily reach of 15% for the months before the SARS outbreak.” (MediaCorp News, 2003a)

How has SARS been formatted on Singapore television? Firstly, a SARS channel which resembled a CNN or Channel NewsAsia (CNA) was set up in April 2003, not only forcing StarHub TV (pay TV operator), MCS and MediaWorks (the two terrestrial networks, the three rival television networks, to join forces and plug the informational gap left by SARS.

Secondly, in April 2003, some skits with neighbours exhorting each other in Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka, Hainanese and Cantonese to be careful of SARS were produced. Set in coffee shops reminiscent of Singapore’s old Coffee Shop television series in the 1980s, it served as ‘public service announcements’. This was the first time dialect was actively endorsed for local television production in Mandarin-television land for the benefit of older, non-Mandarin-speaking Chinese Singaporeans.

Thirdly, two SARs music videos appeared. The first, a tribute song-cum-music video for The Courage Fund 8 entitled Thru your Eyes (Heroes & Angels), featured local TV celebrities like ex-MTV VJ Natalie Hutagulung, medical staff of Tan Tock Seng Hospital (where SARS patients were held), and politicians like Mah Bow Tan the Minister of National Development which played repeatedly on all channels including CNA since April 2003. This was quickly followed by second music video that was a joint MCS-Health Promotion Board-Ministry of Health project entitled SARS-Vivor Rap by PCK Pte Ltd. This featured Channel 5 funnyman Gurmit Singh rapping in character as Phua Chu Kang on the same-named popular local TV sitcom with his curly locks and face mole speaking Singlish (mixture of Singapore colloquial English) to encourage Singapore residents to wash their hands with soap and more. It certainly reinforces his status as a national icon of sorts. Also, local English drama got a boost of reality TV with MCS’s half-hour docudramas based on SARs-affected patients stories (entitled True Heroes) were retold on Channel 5 in June 2003 with record-breaking viewership for their channel (MediaCorp News, 2003b).

Finally, gameshows came to the fore again when local TV celebrities appeared in formatted game shows like ‘Everyone Wins’ donate the winning proceeds to the NKF Charity Show 2003 in May for Channel 8; and even for game shows that have just debuted like ‘Show Me The Power’ (aka Dog Eat Dog) had invited celebrities
to their second episode telecast on 21 May 2003 to donate to the Courage Fund for Channel U. All these are examples of how local television programmes have an edge in blending local knowledge of issues, concerns and cultural icons with global formats in ways that sustain viewership on local TV channels.

This article shows how Singapore’s unique field of television production favors using formatting production strategies like game show formats on local TV. Global ‘trends’ in TV formatting have stimulated a wider public interest in the game-show genre with the industry engaging and experimenting to produce a suite of shows. Hence, Singapore’s uptake of international game shows have started a ‘chain reaction’ that raises audiences’ horizons of expectations to challenge Singapore’s media producers to create more original Asian media productions in the future. Finally, as seen in the example of SARS, Singapore television industry’s creative use of formats are mostly experiments in fusing local knowledge with global templates - through adapting licensed international game shows, creating hybrids from formatted international gameshows, MTV-look-alike music videos, reality-linked dramas or CNN-like news channels, etc. The range is astounding as ‘formatting’ allows constant reinvention on local television, making everyday issues familiar and accessible to media-savvy audiences exposed to cultural exports from Hollywood, Europe and Japan. However, when dealing with local issues and content, Singapore’s media producers have to face dilemmas that constantly stretch their creativity – how do they tell local stories, relate and amuse in the latest (global) fashions without falling into overt nationalism or commercialism?

The games that Singapore media producers play to create Asian television productions that capture audience ratings and push creative licenses in regulated Asian television industries have just begun. Forging creative alliances with recognised global talents or international expertise in licensed formats is but one backdoor solution for a developing Asian media industry seeking to globalise in years to come.

NOTES
1. Formatted game shows are used in the sense described by Moran (1998) to define industrial formats: those licensed or adapted from well-known licensed TV programs using a fixed ‘recipe’ and series of production stages, schedules, expertise and software. These are exportable and exchangeable across national borders for a fee.
2. The figure was obtained from Singapore’s Department of Statistics Annual figures (2001).
3. According to the Department of Statistics’ (DOS) latest available figures (2002), persons of Chinese origin accounted for 77.2 per cent of the population, Malays 13.9 per cent, Indians 7.9 per cent, and other ethnic groups 1.5 per cent. In addition, there were about 812,000 foreign citizens working in Singapore as of June 2001.

4. This is according to figures released on Singapore Broadcasting Authority’s March 2002 online press release of local TV ratings. While this release was originally accessed from SBA’s website at www.sba.gov.sg/press, the organisation has restructured in 2003 and all SBA releases are now archived at http://app9.internet.gov.sg/scripts/MDA/sba_news_room/press_archives.asp.

5. The Pyramid Game is a Singaporean version of a famous 30-year old US game show (known as The $25,000 Pyramid) that became a TV format and board game. The American game show debuted on US network television in 1973 and travelled to ITV in the 1980s. The objective of the game is that two teams of players, each comprising two persons, competed to describe items from a related category to their partners within a 30-second clock, with the ultimate goal of reaching the Pyramid to play for the grand prize of $25,000. See: http://www.boardgames.com/25000pyramid.html.

6. This comment was submitted by a person named Liz (5/4/2001) on the internet forum pages of the online version of MediaCorp Publishing’s English-language television and entertainment guide, 8 Days, Issue No. 551 28 Apr - 5 May, 2001. This website (8days_550/forum_index.htm” http://8days.mediacorppublishing.com/8days_550/forum_index.htm) was accessed during 23 July 2002.

7. See MediaCorp Singapore’s corporate website for the Top 50 Chinese programs in 2002. Monthly listings of the top rated Chinese-language programmes from mid-2001 to mid-2002 were available on http://corporate.mediacorpsingapore.com/ratings/ when accessed in April/May 2002. Since then only the most recent top-rated television programmes are available online at MediaCorp Singapore’s ratings webpage.

8. The Courage Fund is a fund set up by the Red Cross Society to help those nurses and doctors who fight SARs in service of the public, as well as the SARs-affected families and individuals), for the SARs caregivers.

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