

“Harmonizing” TV Broadcast

Mugur Zlotea, Visiting Faculty, IITM China Studies Centre, IIT Madras & Lecturer, Oriental Languages Department, University of Bucharest.

On the 26th of November 2011, the Chinese State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), the body responsible for censoring any material deemed politically sensitive or offensive to Chinese culture, made public the *Circular on Further Strengthening Integrated Satellite TV Channel Programs Management* ordering 34 satellite channels all over China to rethink and reorganise their programming. According to the *Circular*, channels are expected to drastically reduce the number of “excessively entertaining” programs such as talent shows, talk shows, reality shows, or any programs with matchmaking themes, expanding instead news, economic, cultural, educational and documentary programs. According to the *Circular*, the new programming schema should reflect the traditional moral values of the Chinese people and the core values of socialism.

SARFT insists that these changes are designed to satisfy the demands of the majority of the audience for a more diverse and tasteful content. Channels are advised to think of the social impact of the programming and should organically integrate social benefits with economic ones. SARFT took a stand against TV ratings as the only criterion for judging the success of a program, putting forward “the three may-nots”: may not categorise programs according to ratings, may not rely solely on the ratings to eliminate a program, may not rely solely on rating to evaluate the quality of a channel. What was needed, they said, was “setting up of a scientific, objective and impartial comprehensive program evaluation system”. This sounds suspiciously familiar in the Chinese context. Programs that pose a political problem, or even those of values or even style are to be criticized, readjusted, their broadcast time could be changed and could even be pulled off the air.

The *Circular*, called online *xian yu ling*, (the order to limit entertainment), did not come as a surprise. In July this year, SARFT launched a debate about how to prevent programming from becoming “excessively entertaining”, expecting many channels to alter their programming in order to meet the demands of the official body. The *Circular* became a hot topic for discussion on the Internet. While there were those arguing that such a measure was needed because some of the programs were indeed too vulgar, many questioned the authority of SARFT to impose such measures and wondered about the criteria to judge a program as “excessively entertaining”.

“How can one use a good quality news programs to fill in the space vacated by entertainment programs?”, rhetorically asked one blogger on Sohu.com, a popular web portal in China. “If the pattern of the news programs and the angle do not change, no matter how much news will be on TV, the public will not watch it.”, commented another.

Bloggers have been quick to mention that any organization must obey the law, SARFT included, and thus SARFT did not have the authority to dictate to local

satellite channels to reorganise their programming, since no local channel was subordinate to SARFT. The Chinese bloggers pointed out the irony of these measures considered necessary in order to improve public morals, since imposition of the measures itself can be debated as immoral since this imposition ignores the law. “Using immoral means to try to develop public morals is nothing but a joke.”, commented one of the bloggers.

The measures imposed by SARFT come at a time when not only the CPC officials, but also common people, lament over the continuous decay in public morals in China. The image of the two-year old baby lying on the street after run over twice still haunts many people. However, blaming television for decaying public morals is not a solution. The SARFT officials complained that many of the shows to be forbidden simply copy foreign shows. In response to this one blogger posed a question with regard to question the impact of “immoral” TV programming on the public. He highlighted the willingness of the foreigners vis-à-vis the Chinese to help people visibly in trouble by quoting two recent incidents that were discussed widely online. He referred to an incident in October when an American tourist jumped into the West Lake, in Hangzhou, to save a drowning woman as Chinese onlookers watched. In another similar incident in Xi’an, no one seemed to notice a man who had fainted on the street but a foreign woman who asked for help and tried to take the man into a nearby shop but was stopped by the owner of the shop who did not want to court problems. The blogger also mentioned one of the photos on Weibo showing Dutch people gathered, in Rotterdam, to help a Chinese student who had fainted on the street, in clear contrast with the indifference of the Chinese passers-by. After all, the blogger concluded, all these people came from countries where valueless “excessively entertaining” programs were not at all forbidden.

Asked how could one judge a program as “overly entertaining”, SARFT spokesperson identified four criteria: function, composition, result and overall effect. The problem is that the four criteria make it possible for any type of program to be labeled “overly entertaining”. According to SARFT, the function of a TV station is to be “the voice of the Party and the people”, and thus any program that pays too much attention to entertaining, ignores the ideological content or the aesthetic aspect, or refuses to fulfill social duties and spread core values could be marked as “overly entertaining”. The programs should have “style, stimulate the spirit and delight the minds of the audience”. In spite of all the rhetoric, no one can consider these criteria a scientific evaluation system.

Many outside China consider that the Party’s concerns over losing control over public opinion is behind the new measures that the Party has adopted with regard to media. The forbidden programs competed with the official sanctioned ones and gave the audience the feeling that they actually mattered by allowing them to directly vote for the contestants and by taking into account their opinions. After all, any show can survive only for as long as it has an audience.