

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Franchising culture for Kazakhstan television: producers' ambivalence and audiences' indifference

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After decades of state-owned broadcasting as part of the Soviet Union, the arrival of commercial television in Kazakhstan meant expanded entertainment programming for the masses. Adaptation of program formats and genre from abroad provided a quick-and-dirty solution to increased channels and broadcast hours, but little has been written about the challenges to program producers or about viewer opinion. Despite Kazakhstan producers and consumers being initially curious and tolerant towards the new cultural offerings, I found neither seemed fully receptive to the commercialization of television programming but somewhat resigned to the imperative. Yet this response might only last while there is an older generation that remembers Soviet days and holds to some of its cultural values. I argue that creation and reception of such commercial television programs may provide yet another site of cultural contestation in the post-Soviet age between a globalized Western, regional Russified, and a nationalistic Kazakhstan one. Thus my paper explores the hybridization of quasi-national culture in search of audiences. I conclude from my research that Kazakhstan's commercial television needs to reserve space for the authentic expression of the multi-cultural nature of this society.

The former Soviet Union's decline and demise in the early 1990s ushered in an era of media diversity in the newly independent states of Central Asia that was sponsored by foreign and local businesses. Aiming for economic viability and financial success in this new competitive environment, Kazakhstan television stations led the way in adopting uncritically the model of foreign commercial stations. Some went as far as to simply relay programming from Russian channels that had advanced earlier and quicker along this path, and whose programming was still culturally accessible to majority of its population. But it was a matter of time before Kazakhstan stations were required by law to develop their own programming, if only adaptations of global program formats and localized versions of universal broadcast genres. Years later, television programming has become relatively plentiful and viewers quite sophisticated in their consumption of the medium, even in their appreciation of its cultural pedigree. This is in abject contrast to the caricature of Kazakhstan promoted by the comedy *Borat*, familiar to audiences worldwide and depicting a boorish, peasant culture. In this paper I seek to analyze both program producers' attitudes during the initial years of the transition and viewers' perceptions over a decade after television's liberalization.

Political history

From the early 18th century onwards the Russian Empire extended its control over the Central Asian steppes, used by the largely nomadic Turkic tribes, through diplomatic and trade means (Hiro, 1995: 1-7). When there were periodic uprisings, successive Tsars of Russia resorted to military conquest and colonization of the region but afforded due respect to cultural and religious traditions. The abdication of the last Tsar Nicolas raised hopes of independence in Central Asia as the Bolsheviks had initially pledged equal sovereignty and self-determination for all nations within the former empire. Lenin had argued that nationalisms as a reaction to capitalism would be replaced by internationalism once socialism gained ascendancy. But when the despotic leader Stalin came to power in 1924, he advocated the establishment of the Soviet Union (USSR) as a federation of nations with Russia dominant. One devious means by which he consolidated control was by personally redrawing the borders of each proposed Central Asian state to incorporate substantial ethnic minorities from other states; thus each state would be too disunited to resist domination (Hiro, 1995: 8-23). In this way Kazakhstan found itself with a large Russian minority, alongside the majority native Kazaks and smaller minorities of Uzbeks and Uighurs, among others.

Soon after, the redistribution of Central Asian lands—previously owned by Russian colonizers—to the landless was superseded by collectivizing farming and settling the largely nomadic indigenous peoples. Russian literacy and use of the Cyrillic alphabet were promoted, along with the eradication of superstition including the Islamic religion. While Russia was under siege by Germany in World War II, the country faced an overwhelming need to foster patriotism and unity across the USSR. Given Russia's dependence on the resources of Central Asia for the war effort, Stalin had to relent on his more oppressive programs (Hiro, 1995: 24-35). Khrushchev, who succeeded Stalin, was determined to make the USSR self-sufficient in grain and meat, and the national government selected Kazakhstan to have millions of hectares of grazing land converted to this task. To create the new kind of agriculture, settlers came from Russian, Ukrainian and German backgrounds. They were resented by the native Kazakhs and this resentment fuelled muted calls for cultural autonomy. Such agitation came to a head much later under "perestroika" or deregulatory stance of the Gorbachev era in 1980s USSR, when a repressive Russian was arbitrarily appointed as party head in Kazakhstan. Subsequent riots and their quelling led to the appointment instead of a Kazak national, Nazabayev, as party leader, who was later to push for the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to replace the USSR (Hiro, 1995: 106-120). Two decades later he remains in power as president of an independent Kazakhstan.

Media history

Television was first introduced into Kazakhstan's then capital, Almaty, in 1958. Over the next seven years it was expanded to major regional cities. Needless to say, all television broadcasts in the Soviet/communist era were state-run. Broadcasts were bilingual with 40 percent in Kazak and 60 percent in Russian, though languages of significant minorities were slowly introduced (Barlybaeva, 1995). In television's initial years, the lack of technology to broadcast nationally enabled some regionalism, but this was soon replaced by centralization from Moscow in keeping with the typically Stalinist ethos still prevailing. Such a programming policy remained the status quo till the 1980s era of "glasnost" or policy of openness under Gorbachev that unleashed demands for ethnic and localized television in the non-Russian states within the USSR (Mickiewicz, 1988: 207-208).

In the early 1990s immediately upon independence, the state-funded Kazakh State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company operated two television channels, Inter-Channel and the National Channel for a daily total of 18 broadcasting hours. By 1993, a private channel, KTK, had acquired its own transmitter and studio in Almaty, and it was poised to go national. Two other private channels, Tan-TV and TVIN, were more limited in terms of programming and broadcast hours, and their reach was largely confined to the region around the capital city (Hadlow, 1994). There were also Russian, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan channels, as well as local cable and terrestrial commercial channels available in about 12 regional centers of the country. An alternative media institution was the video salons in Kazakhstan, with 2,386 of them officially registered (Barlybaeva, 1995).

Even so, in the mid-1990s the media was still considered an adjunct of the state, both by the general public and the political leadership. Such an attitude reflected the legacy of the communist era when the state and many people perceived broadcasting as a propaganda tool (Mukatayev, 1995). From my observations on a fieldtrip to Kazakhstan in the early-2000s, over a decade after the transition to capitalism, much of the programming was entertainment, often adaptations of foreign genres and formats. In the media literature this phenomenon has been termed “copycatting” or global program-format adaptation, while in the business discipline it would be classified as international franchising. Deliberately or incidentally, such adapted programs, whether of quiz-shows or soap-operas, have served as propaganda tools for the capitalist, new economic order.

Formats as franchise

Format adaptation is defined by Moran (1998) as the practice whereby a group of television production ideas and techniques are cloned or copycatted to make another program, usually in another TV industry. Over the past 20 years, the market significance of television program formats has multiplied exponentially, due to two developments. The first of these was the US 1976 Copyright Act that cleared the way for program producers to secure legal protection for formats; this helped formalize an international licensing system (Freedman and Harris 1990). However, this licensing system was far from perfect, in fact, helpless in dealing with piracy, especially in some parts of Asia where piracy received tacit state support.

The second development involved the worldwide multiplication of television channels and transmission hours, offering an increasing array not only of programs but also of competing services (Noam 1992). In ever more competitive national and international environments spawned by privatization and marketization, broadcasters had increasing reasons to try to guarantee new television programs' success. As Drinkwater and Uncles (2007) demonstrate, programming success or failure has a direct effect on any broadcaster's brand image. Thus adaptating proven program formats from other national territories has been perceived as a crucial means to virtually guaranteeing a profit.

Program adaptation often caters to rather localized languages and cultures, rather than attempting to reach a regional audience. For example, Koukoutsaki (2003) thinks that European drama has adapted elements of US soaps to specific local rather than pan-European tastes. Further she points out that when Greek television's drama output increased in the 1970s, much of it was adaptation of classic Greek literature, done for both financial and ideological reasons. Interestingly the similarity between television during Greece's military dictatorship and subsequent conservative governments, and more recently under the privatized market of the 1990s suggests a common model of promoting entertaining fiction over more

serious programming. On the other hand, Zoonen (2001) argues that reality television, as well as talk shows and soap operas before it, might be a way of observing vicariously what has become inaccessible in our societies and culture—the mundane lives of other ordinary people. He also draws analogies between reality formats like *Big Brother* (and its spin-off *The Bus*) and the wider postmodern society of the Netherlands. In specific reference to Russian television, despite its successes at other television genre like game-shows, talk shows and reality shows, various Russian attempts at producing sitcoms have failed abysmally. In seeking to understand why, Heller (2003) argues that this is due to a failure of producers to understand Russian culture, which currently reaches back to the Tsarist era, via the Soviet era, while coming to terms with US cultural influences. The format and genre adaptations that have worked are those that have understood not simply Russian humour, but Russian politics, cultural history, intellectual traditions, and personal economic struggles as well. Hence television format adaptations provide yet another site for negotiating post-Soviet cultural identity as well as for resisting globalization and commercialization.

The business disciplines have scarcely done any research on television program-format adaptations, either as a form of franchising or of outsourcing. One exception is Windeler and Sydow (2001) who have documented how globalization, digitization and privatization have led to changing practices in the German television industry and resulted in an evolution of organizational forms. Similar pressures are increasing worldwide to outsource program production to project networks of independent creators, directors and technical crews. Yet Bielby and Harrington (2004) pointed that the reception of cultural products in cross-border exports faces risks, even within similar cultural worlds. Recognizing that it is difficult to generalize from research done on transitional economies is not generalizable, given these economies' diversity, Alon and Banai (2000) have investigated the environmental factors that matter to franchising in Russia, the largest and most developed of the television franchise markets. There, even some of the unfavourable factors such as political risk, crime and corruption suggest that having a local partner through franchising might be invaluable. However, other factors such as restrictive laws, poor infrastructure and limited capital are harder to overcome. Similarly the contributors to Welsh and Alon (2001) seem to concur that franchising provides an invaluable means of promoting small and medium business development in liberalized developing and transitional economies. Still, each market has its own particular set of circumstances and it is difficult to generalize about franchising strategies, much less apply theoretical models drawn from the developed world. Thus the relatively under-researched Kazakhstan television market makes for a worthwhile site of investigation.

Sources and resources

On reviewing the largely quantitative literature on franchising, Elango and Fried (1997) have called for “fine-grained” research methods such as case-studies to be applied. They argue that such methods better aid in understanding the phenomenon's complexity, such as how decision-making is shared between franchisors and franchisees. Elango and Fried also appeal for empirical research that would not just describe franchising practices but also critically analyze their suitability. This is particularly relevant when researching a creative industry like television. Hence I have adopted a phenomenological approach to understanding the practice of television program format adaptation as franchising in the context of Kazakhstan, a transitional economy cited as an engine for growth in the CIS, particularly among its Central Asian neighbours.

A key source of data on Kazakhstan program adaptation is a 1996

documentary tracing the local adaptation of the soap-opera *Crossroads*, a clone of a long-running British soap-opera. This documentary was broadcast as part of the BBC's Omnibus television program, and it provides a unique insight into that pioneering event. The documentary covers the creation of Kazakhstan's first soap-opera under the tutelage of a production team of experienced soap-opera makers from the United Kingdom (UK). This team was funded by British taxpayers in the pro-capitalist Thatcher era through the Know-How Fund for humanitarian aid at a cost of US\$2.25 million for the first 12 episodes. Presumably the UK government of the time considered the promotion of consumption and other market values a valid form of aid to a transitional economy. To establish this soap-opera held the promise of stimulating an on-going export of creative consultancy services. I supplemented data from this video documentary with an account of the program adaptation process written by someone who had observed it first-hand but published much later (Mandel, 2003). Through textual analysis these secondary sources provide valuable insight into conditions in the early years of commercial television in Kazakhstan and its initial encounters with globalized Western cultural production.

Furthermore, I have relied on three small focus groups on television consumption, particularly dealing with adapted program formats. These focus groups were convened in Almaty in the mid-2000s and facilitated in the Russian language by a Kazakhstan researcher who was a recent business graduate from a US university. Totalling 24 people, the focus groups comprised students, housewives and working professionals. The age range of the participants might seem relatively young at 19-35 years, though this was also the prime target market of the media and advertisers backing the adaptation of formatted television programs. The ratio of women to men was 65:35, in keeping with the general predominance of women as audiences for television, particularly soap-operas. The audio-taped discussions were transcribed and translated by the convenor of the groups. The convenor served also as my interpreter during my fieldwork in Kazakhstan, interviewing industry executives whose comments are incorporated into the following sections on the state of the television industry.

Television scene: national networks

Of the terrestrial national broadcasters (Table 1), Kaz One had a 98 percent audience reach in Kazakhstan, ORT 89 percent, and Khabar TV 85 percent in 2002 (according to the social research firm of Concom Eurasia). While the public broadcaster Kaz One had technically the highest penetration in the country, in reality it had a low viewership because most of its programming was considered “*dull*.” The leading television broadcaster, commercial or otherwise, in Kazakhstan was Khabar TV, which sold the programming it produced for itself to other stations for rebroadcast later (Interview Kzs02). The daughter of Kazakhstan President Nazabayev had inaugurated Khabar TV as “*something novel*” in entertainment broadcasting but the government subsequently extended control over it, not formally but indirectly. For instance, it “*taught Kazak and English languages in support of the government policy*,” and it included programs about museums and theater in addition to light entertainment (Interview Kaz09). Arna television station, formerly Khabar TV's second channel, broadcast only in Kazak although less than half of ethnic Kazakhs (or 16 percent of the total national population) speak the language. Thus Khabar TV was classified as “*social television*” by one respondent, who believed it was essentially government-owned, just as much as Kaz One was (Interview Kzs07).

Table 1: Free-to-air television channels in Kazakhstan

Channel	Origin	Programming observations
KTK	Kazakhstan	News, lifestyle shows on weekends in Kazak
ORT-Kaz	Kazakhstan	Largely Russian programming
Kazakhstan One	Kazakhstan	Kazak-dubbed US dramas, late-night Hindi movies
Khabar TV mixed	Kazakhstan	Game-shows in Russian language but with Kazakhstan audience

Source: Author's observation

ORT-1 was the leading Russian-language channel in Kazakhstan by ratings. Many of its talk-shows, game-shows and interview programs were cloned from western formats. ORT Kaz was produced in Russia and not broadcast “live” but with a two-hour delay which allowed for the insertion of Kazakhstan advertising, news, weather and other forms of local contextualization (Interview Kzso9). Though ORT was not state-owned, it was said to come under strong political influence in both Russia and Kazakhstan (Interview Kzso4). Hence because ORT was “cautious” with its programming and news, it was granted a license to broadcast free-to-air in Kazakhstan. On the other hand, its rival channel RTR was considered by the Kazakhstan authorities to be aggressively pro-ethnic Russian in the country and so was only available, together with other Russian channels, on cable pay-TV (Interview Kzso9). Yet another television broadcaster dominating the Kazakhstan market was the local commercial channel KTK. All the national channels in Kazakhstan together raised US\$25-30 million from advertising annually, which was deemed “sufficient to survive financially but to not be very profitable” (Interview Kzso9). Strictly speaking, these channels were not competitors for the same audience markets even though they had roughly the same geographical reach.

Regional stations

While the national television broadcasters were targeting a mass audience, other stations targeted niche markets. Shahar TV, based in the now commercial capital Almaty, was a relatively new and small commercial station, with only 45 employees in both its radio and television stations, averaging 22 years in age. Channel 31 was described as being more “youthful and truthful,” seeking as it does to be more frank and candid in style (Interview Kzso3) and music-oriented in programming (Interview Kzso6). The stations “A1” and NTK were also more youth oriented, but most other stations were undifferentiated (Interview Kzso6). Channels such as Shahar, Raxat and IOCA were only Almaty-wide in their reach. Yet another Almaty channel, Tan TV, was first owned by an ex-mayor’s wife and then sold to the political opposition, but subsequently the government ordered it closed on some regulatory pretext (Interview Kzso9). Via subscription to satellite and cable television, a middle-to-upper class minority of Kazakhstanis had access to a wide range of television channels from Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries (Table 2), as well as dozens of others from Europe, Asia and North America, though of the latter were of low viewership.

Table 2: CIS television available via cable in Kazakhstan

Channel	Origin	Programming observations
NTV	Russia	Russian music programs, Sunday movies
RTR	Russia	US comedies dubbed into Russian
"K" cartoons	Russia	Children's programming, including Italian
"I"	Russia	Children's programming, music programs
ACT	Russia	Comedies and documentaries in Russian
THT	Russia	US movies in Russian
Ajar TV	Uzbekistan	Programming in Uzbek language

Source: Author's observation

Crossroads and Perekryostok

An original soap-opera, *Crossroads* had been an immensely popular program in the UK. It was broadcast by commercial television stations between the mid-1960s through to the late-1980s. This first ever British soap-opera was inspired by the genre developed in the US (sponsored initially by soap manufacturers). Through similar realistic stories and characters, the adaptation *Perekryostok* (the name *Crossroads* translated into Russian) was meant in the Kazakhstan context to be a vehicle for ideas about economic reform, namely a transition from being a communist planned economy to a capitalist *laissez-faire* one (Mandel, 2003). Far from being simply a commercial proposition by global media conglomerates, this project of adapting a foreign soap-opera by an indigenous television station had the blessing of Kazakhstan's President, no less. Sponsors were optimistically approached for the identically-titled Kazakhstan soap-opera, but by the time of the documentary's making only the Russian vodka manufacturer Smirnoff had signed up for product placements while Austrian Airlines had signed up for advertising spots.

The producer on the expatriate team described their organization in the UK as being a "factory for soap-operas," while seeing themselves in Kazakhstan as "soap missionaries." In all the meetings filmed between the Kazakhstan scriptwriters and their UK script consultant, the former looked patently bored if not clearly hostile. Within the very first scriptwriters' workshop, the Kazakhstan writers had changed the storyline so far from the original brief that the UK consultant complained that "a client would have to reject it." Their first draft, which featured over 40 characters, was considered "unwieldy" by this consultant, possibly because it was not cost-effective in a market-oriented production. The Kazakhstan writers, on the other hand, expressed annoyance at the non-mutual creative process, feeling dictated to by the British. They had expected to work in tandem, sharing their perspectives, since they "knew best the kind of people who lived in the country." Furthermore the Kazakhstan co-director on the project was unhappy with what he perceived as the low standards and less-than-ideal creativity; he wanted to "inject a sense of morality."

In the casting, some well-known Kazakhstan actors who had not been selected by the UK team were resentful and critical of the audition process (Mandel, 2003). Even a selected local actor complained on camera, but in the absence of the UK team, that the script was “*empty, meaningless and clearly rubbish.*” He attributed this to the UK team’s commuting between their 5-star luxury hotel and the confines of the Almaty television studio; they were thus out of touch with the realities of Kazakhstan life. That actor questioned why the UK team had come to Kazakhstan, except for “*commercial corporate reasons and personal financial gain.*” On another occasion, over drinks together at their hotel, the UK co-director responded that their purpose was “*to create high-quality drama in order to help Kazakhstan citizens understand capitalism.*” He did not appear noticeably to impress his local counterparts present at all. The local actor in question later took the UK team around the area to culturally familiarize them with Kazak life. He had them visit his rural home-village, where the documentary shows them visibly uncomfortable with the social, religious and dietary practices in Kazakhstan as they experienced people’s daily life there for the first time.

At a later writers' meeting that was filmed for the documentary, the Kazakhstan writers reported that they had been “*instructed*” by some unspecified local authority to include specific mention of the benefits of economic reform two episode-weeks earlier in the script. When the UK director responded that he would not be “*party to including such overt propaganda,*” the Kazakhstan writers informed him that if they were to resist that instruction they would be sacked from their jobs. On the other hand, the UK director had wanted to use the birth of a newborn baby to exemplify the “*start of the new nation,*” but the local team objected. The latter raised the fact that this would conflict with local customs, for in ethnic Kazak culture especially a baby was not shown to others for 40 days from birth. Still, the crew were able to find a willing mother who needed the money, as predicted cynically by the UK director, to loan her baby for the initial episode. Issues of inter-ethnic marriage between an ethnic Russian and an ethnic Kazak in the plot were the source of much disagreement within the writing process. Such an inter-ethnic family was promoted by the UK team as invaluable to promoting cultural unity in a newly independent Kazakhstan, but soon after they had left the country, in later episodes the Kazakhstan writers portrayed the husband and wife as incompatible, resulting eventually in the couple’s divorce (Mandel, 2003).

The documentary subsequently showed two of the Kazakhstan writers at home, who duly reported that they had quit the soap-opera project because they were unable “*as artists and intellectuals*” to agree with its crass commercial direction. Notably, both were ethnic Russians rather than ethnic Kazaks. There was also resentment expressed that the UK team stayed in a hotel where “*the room rates of US\$200 per night are about the monthly wage of a (local) writer.*” Being proud of their own Russian culture and Soviet heritage, they said they were not prepared to “*kneel to the viewer—it is not the artist's role.*” The local co-director who later joined them added that it was wrong to “*confuse ideology and culture,*” while a writer retorted insightfully that “*the soap-opera phenomenon is political.*” Their discussion turned to how soap-operas might stultify people, thus making them more manageable or pliable by leaders. After the broadcast of the first episode, watched by the whole crew that worked on the project, an ethnic Kazak scriptwriter modestly declined praise, saying it was “*not at all*” what she had originally written. But her further comment that this soap-opera was “*rubbish*” invited the rejoinder of one other crew member that it was “*no worse than any other soap-operas currently on air in Kazakhstan.*” What later television audiences were to make of such adapted programs is what I looked into next.

Viewers' opinions

After more than a decade of radical change to the Kazakhstan television scene, some members of its regular audience were invited into focus groups to express their opinions and discuss their perspectives, especially on the phenomenon of television program adaptations in general. They were asked neither solely about soap-operas, nor about format-adapted *Crossroads* which had long since ceased broadcasting. Although program adaptation or copycatting in the arena of entertainment or information had become fairly common by the early 2000s, these seemed to be taken for granted by audiences in Kazakhstan.

When asked to give specific examples with music, films, books, and television programs many in the various audience focus groups could not think of many titles. But once they were given a working definition of the concept, the respondents soon recognized instances of copycatting and its origins: *"That happens more often now as the show biz is growing in Russia especially."* Most of the copycatted programs named were on television such as entertainment shows, television lotteries and especially music videos: *"Music—some local big stars are using for example, Turkish popular melodies, and reuse them with Russian words."* One person cited a newly established MTV-style channel—though this might not constitute copycatting but rather a program genre: *"Newly established (or they simply change the label) Hit TV channel that all day long broadcasts MTV-style music from Russia."*

Participants gave other reasons why people in Kazakhstan were able to recognize television adaptations or copycatting in different types of programs. Firstly, many people recognized the copycatted program's pedigree in Russian programs they had seen before: *"Before we have had any local television, we have always had Russian television – ORT, RTR and others channels."* Others confirmed that they had watched the original programs even presently on a foreign channel via subscription: *"Many local programs are 'descendants' of Russian programs we watch on cable or satellite."* Second, keen on foreign programming, many Kazakhstanis identified anything innovative they watched as having foreign origin: *"People have a deep interest in everything Western – so we usually think what we watch or hear as something that has originated in the West."* This "cultural cringe" occurs even if that were simply an unfounded assumption: *"If any new program comes out, we would first think of our own television industry being unable to produce anything like that and that is why they automatically think its origin is somewhere else."* Thus the incidence of "copycatting" might have been over-reported by these respondents.

The focus group viewers thought quiz and entertainment shows were the type of television programs most often adapted because of their popularity: *"People want entertainment after hard work or stress – so they get it on TV."* Other viewers were perceptive about the ease and low-cost of such production: *"It is an easy scheme – you don't have to create anything. Just get several MTV videos and make a hit parade with a good-looking girl – for example."* In music programming, viewers had spotted that adaptation was necessary to appeal to their Turkic roots and Russian colonial heritage, yet still be accessible: *"Some local big stars are taking, for example, Turkish popular melodies, and reusing them with Russian words."* Entertainment and quiz shows seemed easier to "copycat" for reasons of cost and consumer demand: *"Rent a studio and ask people questions for the prizes.. and we watch it."* They said all this happened more often in the early 2000s than previously, when the entertainment industry had just begun growing in Russia.

People identified the countries that television copycats came from mostly from the West, broadly defined, especially in relation to Kazakhstan: *“Video came in 1980’s and all we watched was Hollywood action and horror movies and Latin American soap operas for the most part.”* But when we asked whether any particular changes had been made or even what was added when the programs were remade in Kazakhstan, viewers were vague: *“Formats might be foreign, but people and decorations are local.”* Although all groups agreed that changes must be made, because people had different *“mentalities,”* no particular details were mentioned except trite comments like: *“In quiz shows – questions are changed, of course, the way people communicate – because they are local, so that localizes too.”*

There appeared to be a certain nostalgia for programs of the Soviet era, especially among those who had memories of that era including older teens: *“With movies it is a little bit different as old Soviet movies are still very popular among everybody who is older than 14.”* Notably the cut-off point in age seemed to be with those that had grown up pre-independence and liberalization. Viewers mentioned that people in Kazakhstan still considered Soviet movies and cartoons as morally sound and instructive of good values, describing them variously as: *“fair, kind,” “good for upbringing children,” “honest”* and *“teaching good.”*

The focus groups expressed mixed feelings expressed about the practice of copycatting in television. On the one hand, they had a positive attitude towards foreign programming of educational and entertainment value, particularly in extending awareness of the Western world—which had been limited in Soviet days: *“..makes us aware of different ways people live in the world and how we can learn from them.”* All people who took part in the focus groups had lived in both Soviet and post-Soviet times and that, according to the facilitator, made a lot of difference to their perception of program formats.

On the other hand, they thought foreign programs had negative consequences, thought to occur through selective and misleading portrayals: *“Showing only some parts of Western life, thus making us believe in non-existent things—as if life is really that easy-going and happy in the West like in Hollywood movies.”* As with television in general, they thought adapted programs seemed to evidence an increasing materialism in conformity to the West: *“Violence and sex on TV makes our children grow faster and be stuffed with the things they do not need to know that early in life.”* As with other societies experiencing rapid change, the people also expressed concern about adapted programs changing social values: *“We may treat our old people with less respect—because that is what they portray in the movies; makes us less disciplined about how we treat each other in family and romantic relationships.”*

In the immediate post-Soviet era, before there were any locally-produced programs, Kazakhstan channels would insert only local news and weather forecasts into the otherwise Russian standard programming. The rest of the time they would show old Soviet movies or cheap western movies—apparently without any copyrights—or simply re-broadcast popular commercial Russian ones. Thus familiarity with both Russian and foreign cultural patterns made Kazakhstan viewers reasonably able to differentiate between strictly local productions and foreign format adaptations in television programs.

Craftiness of copycatting

During the days of the Soviet Union, people regarded most things produced locally in Kazakhstan as low-quality, especially consumer goods. That

prejudice seems transposed into negative attitudes toward locally produced *services* in post-Soviet times, such as television programs. With the opening of borders, both political and economic, Kazakhstan was bombarded with foreign goods, such as clothes from Turkey and Pakistan and China, and media products from Europe, the US and Latin America. Back then, foreign entertainment was perceived as new and fresh, according to the respondents. However the situation had not changed much in the two decades since, because few outstanding local alternatives had been seen on Kazakhstan television.

The question of identifying and critiquing copycat television programs proved a challenge to Kazakhstan audiences since they often had no definitive criteria to judge whether a work was an adaptation of a global or foreign format. They might have made errors in assuming certain programs were format adaptations or unlicensed clones when the programs might simply be expressions of a genre albeit of foreign origin. Whether Russian programs, original or adapted, were consistently deemed foreign by post-Soviet Kazakhstanis was also unclear. Whether such adaptations by Kazakhstan television become a conduit for a form of cultural and economic imperialism deserves to be monitored in future studies.

Formats are not invariably competitive or commercially successful for their producers. Nor do formats come in totally licensed packages since it is possible for adapters to buy the rights to parts of the original format. Furthermore, producers might find quite different markets for different types of formats such as the straightforward copy, the unlicensed clone, or the opportunistic genre adaptation. There are also limits to formatting. Audiences may tire of multiple adaptations of the same format or the celebrities used in the original; certain adaptations cannot be matched in another version; or the competitiveness, humour or style required of the format may not translate well in a particular cultural context. The small number of “copycat” programs identified by Kazakhstan audiences indicates that these type of format adaptations are not as numerous as once thought to be, reflecting a love-hate relationship with the former political-ideological colonialism and now cultural-material neo-colonialism of Russia over the Central Asian region.

Perhaps the dissenting Kazakhstan writers saw more clearly than their UK team members that the soap opera was not just another or different entertainment product but essentially propaganda for a new dominant ideology. In carrying out their brief to illustrate the change to a market economy the UK team took to portraying idealized heroes in much the same way that socialist realism did (Mandel, 2003). The audiences on the other hand seemed to prefer the variety offered by television’s liberalization, as in the market for goods and services. Their preference for some Soviet films and programming seemed sentimental and traditional in its cultural yearning, rather than ideological.

Future prospects

The soap-opera adaptation *Perekryostok* or the Kazakhstan *Crossroads* version was never mentioned by respondents—even though it ended in 2000 after a 5-year run and 465 episodes. The reasons why it did not achieve iconic status like *Crossroads* in the UK, or for that matter *Dallas* in the US and abroad, is worth researching further. Instead, by the mid-2000s soap-operas in Kazakstan were identified with Latin America rather than US or Europe. Despite low-quality dubbing and without adaptation, these original Latin American programs, often set in an upper middle-class context, were immensely popular in Kazakhstan. Is it because they afford a window into life elsewhere or is there an aspirational element in the post-Soviet

audience? Are Latin American soap operas more accessible because they closer culturally to transitional and emergent economies, or plainly more global in their themes?

Is a Russian-made program seen not as foreign but as regional, given its post-colonial cultural affinity and language accessibility? If audience response is any guide, Russian adaptations of global formats have paved the way for acceptance of Kazakhstan adaptations. As the largest Central Asian country, Kazakhstan might in turn serve as a half-way house for a global program adaptation by stages for other countries in the region, in much the same way as Korean adaptations of original Japanese formats have found acceptance in Asia. Hence the prevalence and metamorphosis of program format adaptations in Kazakhstan and other ex-Soviet Central Asian countries are worthy of ongoing study.

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