Television Programs Development for Elderly in Thailand

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Abstract
The objective of this research was to study the current situation of TV programs aimed at elderly viewers on free TV channels in Thailand. To investigate this topic, a qualitative research approach was applied. The researcher interviewed 30 key informants, consisting of TV administrators, professional experts, academic experts, experts on the elderly, and TV program advertising sponsors. Data were collected using in-depth interviews and analyzed descriptively. This was an interdisciplinary research, drawing from the fields of communication arts, sociology, demography, psychology, management science, and government media policy studies to develop a broad picture of the future of TV programs for the elderly. The major finding was that TV programs aimed specifically at elderly viewers are likely to appear in the near future as Thai society becomes an aging society. The three major factors that will lead to suitable approaches to the development of TV programs for the elderly are: (1) the external factors of the rising numbers of elderly people in the population, CSR (Corporation Social Responsibility) marketing, and government policies; (2) the internal factors of the free TV channels’ policies and the TV producers’ policies; and (3) the program-related factors of the value of the elderly in Thai culture, the forms of TV programs for senior viewers, the psychology of the aged, and expansion of target viewer age groups.

Keywords
TV programs, elderly, development

Television is a medium that is present in almost every household, and there is a very diverse range of viewer groups. A 2008 survey of mass media (radio and TV) use among people aged six and over found that there are 57 million TV viewers in Thailand, or 94.6% of the population (National Statistical Office 2008). The very large number of TV viewers has brought about a large number of types of TV programs with different content. The thing that media organizations should take into account is that the programming has to meet the needs of the viewers. They should consider groups of viewers whose needs are often ignored by the major commercial media, such as the groups of elderly viewers, children, and low-income viewers. The National Economic and Social Development Board has predicted that the percentage of the population aged 60 years and over will rise from 11.8% in 2010 to 16.8% in 2020 and up to 20% in 2025 (Office of the National Economics and Social Development Board 2006). The aging of the population will inevitably require changes in the communications, political, economic, and social structure in Thailand.

Compared with other segments of the population, the elderly tend to have a rather high rate of exposure

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to TV media, both in Thailand and in other countries. In the USA, the Nielsen Co. (2009) reported that in the fourth quarter of 2009, people aged 50-64 watched on average 42 hours and 38 minutes of TV a week and people aged 65 and older watched on average 47 hours and 21 minutes of TV a week (The Nielson Co. 2009). A survey in Germany found that German people aged 50 years and older watched on average 233 minutes of TV a day, and older people watched more. German people aged 65 and older watched 253 minutes of TV a day (Grajczyk and Zollner 1998). As for Thailand, a 20-year survey (1989-2008) by the National Statistics Office (2008) found that as the nation developed economically, more elderly people tended to be exposed to TV media, i.e., the percentage of people aged 60 and over who said they watched TV rose from 62.9% in 1989 to 73.4% in 1994, 81.3% in 2003 and 84.6% in 2008 (National Statistical Office 2008). Surveys in North America, Europe, and Asia confirmed that TV is a medium that most elderly people watch in their daily lives. Psychologists and behaviorists have explained that as people age, they tend to socialize less due to financial and physical constraints. They tend to spend more time at home, and thus have more time to watch TV. When aged people fall ill or suffer grief from the loss of a partner, then TV can be an aid to dispel loneliness (Gauntlett and Hill 1999). Old people feel that TV keeps them in touch with the outside world and informs them about events and occurrences. They can get news and entertainment and do not feel as deserted or alone (Kathaleen 1989). TV media is important or almost essential for the elderly as shown above. This led to the research question: How can we make existing programming meet the needs of the elderly? This is the origin of the research objective, to study the situation of TV programs aimed at elderly viewers on free TV channels in Thailand.

**OBJECTIVE**

The objective of the research was to study the current situation of TV programs aimed at elderly viewers on free TV channels in Thailand.

**METHODOLOGY**

This was a qualitative research based on in-depth interviews with 30 key informants, consisting of TV administrators, professional experts, academic experts, experts on the elderly, and TV program advertising sponsors (six from each group). The data collection tool was an in-depth interview form. Data were collected using in-depth interviews and analyzed using descriptively analysis.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

In Figure 1, you can see approaches to developing TV programs for the elderly, which was synthesized from the research findings concerning the status of TV programming for the elderly on free TV channels. Three kinds of factors were identified, consisting of external factors, internal factors, and programming factors.

**External Factors**

These factors will support an increase in the number of TV programs aimed specifically at older audiences. They consist mainly of: (1) increasing numbers of elderly people in the population; (2) CSR (Corporation Social Responsibility) marketing strategies; and (3) government policies.

*Rising numbers of elderly.* The number of elderly people is rising in the whole world, including Thailand. Increasing numbers of retirees will have specific problems and demand. The research found that TV is a medium that is viewed to a large extent by the elderly. The TV watching behavior of adolescents and working age people is different because they tend to watch programs on the internet more. This finding is consistent with the report of Khajehian, Esmaeilkhoo, and Yousefikhah who found that elderly people
Figure 1. Approaches to Developing TV Programs for the Elderly in Thailand.

tended to use conventional media like TV, radio, and newspapers, while younger people were more interested in new media than conventional media (Khajeheian, Esmaielkhoo, and Yousefikhah 2012).

**CSR marketing.** The findings of this research indicated that TV station administrators should pay more attention to the segment of elderly viewers because many of them still work and lead normal lives in society. Aiming some programming at the elderly is a way of sacrificing and returning some benefits to society. If TV stations aim only to make profits, then they could play a part in making elderly people fall victim to deceitful advertisements. In addition, socially responsible advertising can help elderly people live happily in society and build a good image for goods, services, and organizations that aid the elderly. This follows the main point of CSR policies, to show responsibility toward consumers and to help develop society (Rinratanakorn 2015). TV programs aimed at elderly audiences are one business opportunity for sponsors, but they should not be labeled as programs for the elderly because most TV stations, sponsors, and advertising agencies would not dare to be associated with programming or products for the elderly. This is because the word “elderly” has a negative connotation. People are afraid of getting old and do not want to feel out of date or past their prime. Viewers do not want to admit that they are elderly and young people do not want to get caught watching programs for the elderly for fear of ridicule. Therefore, content for the elderly should be inserted into ordinary programming in order to maintain the youthful image of TV stations, sponsors, and viewers.

**Government policy.** Thailand has laws, policies, and approaches to support media for the elderly. In 2002, in honor of His Majesty the King’s 72 birthday, and because the year was declared the year of the elderly by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization), representatives from public and private sector organizations for the aged and qualified experts joined to draft the nine articles of the 2002 Declaration of Thai Senior Citizens. One of the articles states that senior citizens should have continuous opportunities for learning and developing their personal potential, and should have access to news and information and beneficial social services (Declaration on Thailand’s Older Persons 2015). The Declaration of Thai Senior Citizens had an expanded result in the drafting of the Second National Plan for Older Persons 2002-2026, which sets...
strategies for promoting the elderly through six major measures. One of those measures is to promote every kind of media that has programs for the elderly and to support senior citizens in accessing knowledge, news, and media (Bureau of Empowerment for Older Persons 2002). The Act on the Elderly, 2003 A.D., also states that elderly people have the right to access various kinds of protection, promotion, and support including education, religions, and useful information and news for their living (The Act on the Elderly 2003).

The research found that the government still has not campaigned seriously for media for the elderly. One reason is that it is a matter of business. TV stations are dominated by the advertising agencies. Most of the products they advertise are aimed at young people. The government should start building awareness among media executives that Thai society is aging, and should build greater awareness of CSR. The main idea behind CSR is that an organization should do business on the basis of morality, ethics, and good governance. Presently, there is a policy of providing media for the elderly but no legal measures to support it. A relevant agency, such as the NBTC (National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission), should take on the responsibility of making the policy more tangible. The NBTC’s rules should be consistent with the government’s policy. A certain proportion of TV broadcasting time, which could be less than 10%, should be set aside and dedicated to programs for the elderly. A 2013 NBTC announcement on TV programming principles stated in Article 7 that licensed broadcasters who have been allocated a wavelength frequency are required to broadcast socially constructive programs or programs for children and youth for at least 60 minutes a day at 16:00-18:00 every day and 07:00-09:00 on Saturdays and Sundays. Article 10 states that licensed broadcasters must provide services to protect the rights of disabled and disadvantaged people to be able to receive and utilize their programs the same as the general public by providing sign language interpreters, subtitles, or other services for all programs that present public news for at least 60 minutes a day (Notification of the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission 2013). However, the NBTC announcement does not have any rule or provision for elderly viewers.

While there is no clear policy from the government, TV stations do not dare to announce that they are providing programming specifically for the elderly for fear that if they did, they might lose sponsors. Some channels already have elderly personnel and actors available. There should be a policy of changing social attitudes to give senior citizens and aging a more positive image. The government should encourage the media to pay more attention to the segment of elders. If society at large places more importance on the elderly, then TV stations will naturally devote more programming to the elderly.

**Internal Factors**

The organization-related factors that can contribute to TV programming for the elderly consist mainly of: (1) the free TV stations’ policies; and (2) TV producers.

**Free TV station policies.** The research found that Channel 3 is a channel for families and youths but also has programs for adults. Similarly, Channel 9 emphasizes programs for children but they are also aimed at viewers of every age group. Channel 5 emphasizes documentaries, which fits with the demands of elderly viewers. Channel 7 has no plan to adjust to an aging society. Channel 11 has a policy of prioritizing programs about the royal family as well as programs to promote national security, democracy, morals, and ethics. TPBS (Thai Public Broadcasting Service) receives some of its funding from tax money and its programming is controlled by ratings. In practice, Channel 3 tries to surreptitiously insert content for the elderly into its programs, especially news programs. Channel 5 caters to the elderly with
its documentary programming even though it does not have an official policy of doing so. Channel 7 has no supporting policy. Channel 9 tries to appeal to diverse viewer segments, including the elderly. Channel 11 does not have a budget allocated for programs for the elderly, but does air one episode each week. TPBS hires producers to produce TV programs and there are still few good quality producers that can produce programs for the elderly. In addition, the research found that senior citizens should be appointed as consultants to TV station executives. This would fulfill the good corporate governance principle of participation. The official policy is to allow citizens to be aware of important decisions impacting society and participate in decision-making by presenting their opinions, thus preventing the government and private sector from monopolizing decision-making power (Sangnimnuan 2010). Multimedia public relations should be used to inform senior citizens about programming aimed at them.

TV producers. The research found that TV producers should pay more attention to elderly viewers. Society will appreciate it if producers give something to elders, because young people will also some day be old. TV producers also have to have ideals. They have to be patient if they cannot get many sponsors to support programs for the elderly in the short term. Advertisers may think that senior citizens have little buying power, but if the producers make very good quality programs, then they will get popular and be talked about, and then the sponsors will want to support them.

Program-Related Factors

The factors that will shape programming for the elderly are: (1) the value Thai culture places on elders; (2) the types and formats of programming for elders; (3) psychology of elders; and (4) expansion of viewer age groups.

The value of elders in Thai culture. Acting on inspiration provided by Her Royal Highness Queen Sirikit, who has praised and admired the value of senior citizens, TV programs should be made to showcase the many accomplishments and skills or aged citizens that can still be useful in today’s society. Since Thai society is an aging society, the power of the elderly should be harnessed. TV programs can be a mechanism to develop elderly citizens by providing information and knowledge. TV is an appropriate medium for the elderly because many of them have problems with eyesight and cannot read much. Senior citizens should be the center of new programming, transmitting their ideas, wisdom, experience, and goodness to later generations. The active aging concept recommends that senior citizens should participate in economic, cultural, political, and work-related activities with their families and communities. The World Health Organization (WHO)’s framework for developing senior citizens stated that three essential components for development are health, security, and participation (World Health Organization [WHO] 2002).

Formats of programs for the elderly. The types of programs for the elderly are informative, news, and entertainment. Even though informative programs are appropriate for viewers of every age group, there should be some that provide information of special interest to the elderly. Educational programs should include adult education. News programs should include and prioritize news about senior citizens. Since many old people are unable to go out of the house to have fun, watching entertainment programs on TV is one of their best ways to relax. In this age of small screen technology, many retired people feel distant from their children and grandchildren. There are fewer family times for talking together. Seniors need TV to relax. Entertainment programs for the elderly should give them enjoyment and make them laugh. The content of programming for the elderly should focus on self-care, health, religion, travel, and new technology. The content should not be too academic or serious. It should be fun and creative, and
should tell about the positive aspects of aging. The appropriate format for programs for the elderly is documentary. If the presentation is fun and creative, such as, a combination of documentary and old-style drama, and if the content is about Buddhist Dhamma or health care, then elder viewers will enjoy it. The presentation style should be a variety of shows, because they can incorporate many different things and can be enjoyable for both old people and younger viewers. TV programs for the elderly should be creative and fun. Old people need excitement and fun in their lives. The comedy should be polite and respectful comedy. The presenters should maintain an easy going tone with meaningful dialogue so that they can deliver information and entertainment in an aesthetically pleasing way. The hosts of TV programs for the elderly should be knowledgeable, capable, and have good communication skills. They should speak politely, because they are speaking to respected elders. Older people are emotionally sensitive. Female presenters should be respectfully dressed. Older presenters are preferable, because they will be better able to create an understanding with older viewers. They should have a trustworthy presenting style. Visual and audio effects should be low key, with little panning and zooming and few graphics. Vivid colors should be included and any written letters on the screen should be larger than usual. The sound level should be loud and clear. Musical soundtracks should be soft and melodious, especially using old style string orchestra music. Because older viewers may have difficulty differentiating the tones of sound, there should be an emphasis on clearly spoken dialogue rather than background music. The audio should match the program format.

Psychology of the aged. The research found that TV programming should meet the needs of the elderly. In order to produce suitable programming, TV stations, producers, and operations personnel need more knowledge about the psychology, problems, and needs of elderly viewers. Their problems include health, education, security, income, work, and welfare. Their needs are physical, emotional, economic, social, welfare, education, and information needs (Yunitum 2012). Furthermore, elderly viewers should be given the opportunity to communicate their opinions and needs to the TV stations.

Expanding viewer age groups. The research found that TV stations should expand the age limits of their target audiences because at present, most of the viewers of health programs are elderly people and it would be beneficial for the elderly and people who are soon going to be elderly. It could also encourage children and grandchildren to participate in caring for their elders. The Health Information System Development Office (2009) reported that caretakers and family members play an important role in insuring the happiness and well being of the elderly (The Health Information System Development Office 2009). In the market, there are only a limited number of products, such as, nutritional supplements, that are aimed at elderly consumers, so TV programs for the elderly should find sponsors that sell products aimed at wider age group of consumers.

CONCLUSIONS

The researchers sincerely hope that this research will be of benefit by providing guidelines for the setting of policies, plans, and measures by the agencies responsible for providing TV programming for the elderly.

References


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