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November 4, 2011 8:54 pm

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Quite right, China, not 'to want to be a millionaire'

By Gautam Malkani

Feedback?

You could almost envy the victims of Chinese media repression. Sick of small-screen idiocy, the bouncers at China's broadcasting authority issued a directive last week to [cut the number of TV game shows](#), reality shows and talent contests.

State officials might have been able to swallow consumer capitalism, but apparently they can't quite stomach the side-servings of materialism, triviality and vulgarity that so many of those shows feed off, then regurgitate and then tastefully re-ingest.

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Meanwhile in India, those very same formats were being celebrated after [Sushil Kumar](#), a 26-year-old clerk whose family couldn't afford a TV set, became the first person to win \$1m on the country's version of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*. Sure enough, as if to underline the movie-like social mobility smugness of the whole thing, commentators promptly highlighted the similarity to the 2008 Oscar-winning *Slumdog Millionaire*.

In case you haven't noticed, for many people, reality TV is The Most Important Thing in the

Whole Wide Universe. China and India's contrasting responses is thus ultimate proof that the border between them isn't just geographic or political, but planetary. And even though I'm Indian, I suspect I might now feel more at home in China.

First, some pro-plebeian perspective: while it's obligatory to dismiss this kind of TV as mindless stupidity that rots your brain, its proliferation does represent a real victory for populism. By transforming members of the public into protagonists, reality TV has democratised our celebrity culture beyond that prophesied by Andy Warhol and has brought home the Beckettian truth that everyday banality can be just as gripping as any car-chase-peppered narrative. It has also provided porn for psephologists by turning passive viewers into active voters.

Literary critic Terry Eagleton best summed up its appeal in an essay about *Big*

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However, China’s cultural gag reflex represents more than just its allergy to self-determination and individualism. It is also more than a thinly-veiled attempt to protect state broadcaster China Central Television given the ratings feast those shows have fed its commercial rivals.

China’s concern about malnourished minds is real. In September, officials ordered Hunan Satellite TV to stop broadcasting *Super Girl*, a talent show that at its peak attracted 400m viewers. Back then, as with last week’s ruling, media groups were instructed to dish out more programming about morality, housework and other subjects that can probably best be described as the broadcasting equivalent of broccoli.

Last year, a bout of national soul-searching was prompted when a female contestant on one of China’s many popular dating shows – *If You Are the One* – rejected a would-be suitor with the words: “I’d rather be sitting inside a BMW crying than sitting on your bicycle and smiling.”

On rival dating show, *Go for Love*, a contestant cut out the metaphors altogether: “Don’t talk to me unless you’re rich.” In case the romance-is-dead message didn’t get through clearly enough, the show renamed itself *Fake Love, Go for the Money*.

These sentiments – or rather the lack thereof – suggest reality TV in China has become a little too real for comfort, like a consumer-cultural equivalent of an orgy for the sexually repressed.

India, on the other hand, is more comfortable with crass materialism and free market kitsch. It isn’t just economics: some Hindus believe the concept of *Artha* justifies an unashamed pursuit of wealth, albeit only as a means to fulfil ones’ duties. As for Indian dating shows, the country’s courtship customs may contain their share of unamorous materialism and pragmatism – perhaps best reflected in *Perfect Bride*, a show in which mothers select spouses for their sons, but thanks to the spell still cast by Bollywood, small-screen romance remains resolutely romantic.

Similarly, India’s throng of TV talent contests tap directly into the daydream factory that Bollywood has long provided. Not only are most of the acts Bollywood-themed, they are dominated by dewy-eyed child contestants being forced to live out their parents’ unfulfilled dreams.

Other shows rely directly on Bollywood stars to draw in viewers (thereby making them more expensive to produce than the staple melodramatic soap operas). Instead of being too real, then, Indian reality TV reinforces populist escapism.

There have been attempts to rein in some of the more risqué content, but a government plan to move *Big Brother*-inspired *Bigg Boss* to a more adult time slot was defeated in court.

Viewers in the west have seen what happens when producers push the boundaries of taste. We know that even when we criticise shows for making a spectacle of the vulnerable, we’re still colluding with programmes that crave attention as much as their contestants do.

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We know that shows like *The Apprentice* are so heavily edited that they turn real people into fictional villains – and that it isn't just the audience being deceived; so are the contestants on the screen.

We know the format has failed to become the great social leveller it once promised to be – instead producing its own kind of celebrity class-system. Basically, we know it's all bullshit – and that this is worse than the initial critique of reality TV as an exercise in voyeurism and narcissism.

Little wonder, then, that a University of Teeside study in August suggested that reality TV is now having a negative impact on young people's self-esteem, fuelling widespread disillusionment.

So, it isn't just the holier-than-highbrow who should be envious of China's clampdown. While India's embrace of reality TV helps keep people blind to the reality of their existence, China's repression suddenly seems strangely liberating.

The writer is an FT journalist and author of the novel Londonstani

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Comments



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Wild Cat | November 7 1:59pm | [Permalink](#) [Report](#)

@Charles Liu: About learning from China being "non-existent", I always find it far easier to understand Western smugness than the Indian variety. Of course it is always far easier to not face uncomfortable truths about China by smothering them with politically-tinged hang-ups. The courage of this particular writer is re-affirmed by every commentator here hand-wringing along predictable ideological lines!

Californian Historian | November 6 9:23pm | [Permalink](#) [Report](#)

atimoshenko, if I truly had the "Freedom to Choose," I would choose to have TV programming that isn't trashy and mindless. I never watch reality TV, and occasionally, I've written a letter to try to save this or that more intelligently-written drama (which is inevitably cancelled), even though I know it is fruitless to do so. The whole "people have the power" thing is true... to an extent.

atimoshenko | November 6 11:10am | [Permalink](#) [Report](#)

Thing is, the "freedom to choose" today is much more illusory than it has historically been. Behavioural psychology has aptly demonstrated that we are nowhere near as rational and free in our preferences as we have thought ourselves to be, and big media players (among other parties) have figured out how to exploit this.

Freedom of choice fundamentally relies on people being difficult to fool, but this is not the case. The solution is obviously not the explicit imposition of preferences by some small group of "wise sages", but the freedom to choose has also now degenerated into an implicit imposition of preferences by a small

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group of smart marketers. We need another system.

Makis1 | November 6 8:46am | [Permalink](#)

[Report](#)

David Mar (comments) has the most perceptive response to this article so far. Leave us alone, for God's sake! Ordinary people do not need the hand-wringing advice of global censors who don't even have the courage to call their support for censorship what it is. (And there's nothing wrong with a poor Indian winning the lottery in a reality show.) Malkani conceals his authoritarian streak beneath the soft claim that we "should be envious" of places where they are cleaning up the TV and getting people to watch what's right.

Hypocritically, Malkani slips in the inevitable "study that shows" that reality TV "is now" (!) having a negative impact on youth self-esteem. If that's true, of course, then there is ample cause to go beyond being envious of a clampdown. Unfortunately for Malkani metasstudies actually do show that five decades of "studies that show" media effects "now" show only that the media don't effect people, who, surprise, surprise, actually know the difference between reality and reality TV (something I'm not sure is true of Malkani).

One of the interesting things about this piece is the way it conceals its pro-censorship thrust by talking about that faraway place, "Over There". Western elites have long projected their moral dilemmas and misgivings onto other, far-away places, but usually as a cover for intervening and making the pygmies do it right. What's interesting today is that writers often use "Over There" as examples of how we should do things over here. And what Western(ized) observers always seem to "envy" is an authoritarian bent "Over There". Francis Fukuyama recently wrote an interesting piece (I think it was in the FT actually) entitled something like "US Democracy Has Little to Teach China". Do Western leaders rattled by economic collapse and fragmentation in visionless societies have Beijing Envy?

blue_sky_123 | November 6 8:36am | [Permalink](#)

[Report](#)

I'm surprised at the FT for printing such a perverse celebration of China's lack of respect for free media or consumer choice. And why the forced comparison with India? Why not target the western countries where reality TV originated and is more popular? For instance, the Indian version of Big Brother only airs for about an hour a day as opposed to the 24/7 screening of the original concept in the west. I also think Mr. Malkani is ill-informed regarding the appearance of big celebs on small screen reality shows in India - many a time they appear to promote their latest ventures and subsequently do not receive huge pay-outs by the shows as he suggests. Similarly, I think the overly cynical attitude towards talent shows is a bit overdone, as often these shows have managed to bring forth formidable talent from remote and poverty-stricken parts of the country.

Finally, I think that perhaps Mr. Malkani is being a little naive himself to think that the reality TV audience is so naive as to take everything shown to them at face value. Perhaps the best evidence of the virtues of a democratic and free media is that for every reality show (or an incident therein) that appears too edited/scripted or staged/engineered to be 'real', there is another show on Indian TV that holds very lively discussions (more like gossip-sessions) with viewers of the said show, tripping over itself to point out what part of the show it suspects is being played up for drama or ratings.

Hu jin tao | November 6 7:00am | [Permalink](#)

[Report](#)

Londonstani Malkani has done an excellent PR job for us . Must check if he got his under the table cash in Macao . Now there are only PLA shows : Guns+ J 20 + Nukes , 3 .4 trillion \$ reserves and how to fake any product in one second. This democracy business is getting tiresome. Why doesn't the FT move into Zongnanhai and reprint the Global Chinese times ? Nobody need to read anything, it will be unchanging from Chen Di times. I must order more digging at Xian, there must be terracotta version of the FT and Malkani .

douglas birbeck | November 5 9:13pm | [Permalink](#)

[Report](#)

great article, thanks !!

From California | November 5 8:42pm | [Permalink](#)

[Report](#)

America long ago reached the stage in which no form of art or entertainment may be censored. No one in this country wants it any different, including myself. But folks, the American way is not the only way in this big world. And there are tons of things they do in China that we wouldn't do ourselves, but which are not only are none of our damn business, but may make sense in such an entirely different culture. The only area where we must necessarily object to censorship is on the political front, because we believe that this imposes on basic human rights, and opposed to merely cultural traditions. If they want to censor reality TV, so what? The real issue was Tiananmen, and we did nothing, to our shame, to protect those that raised our very symbols of liberty in our face.

Californian Historian | November 5 8:23pm | [Permalink](#)

[Report](#)

Like other posters, I am foursquare in favor of freedom from censorship. I do not agree with it.

However, though I may defend to the death your right to say something, that doesn't mean I don't roll my eyes at it--or leave the room when I hear it. "Reality" TV really does drag us down.

I worked in Hollywood just when today's reality TV's elder brothers, the tabloid "news" programs and chat

shows, were created. Shows like these, and the reality shows that followed, were tried for a very simple reason: they're cheap to make.

However, if they've had an effect on public life, it's been to make public life more crude and dishonest. This is largely because in Hollywood, the question is always "where's the conflict? Where's the drama?" When reading any script, or pitching any new TV series, the question was "where's the pressure?" If they had a reality show about cultured, perceptive people, talking about emotional issues in an intelligent way, and reaching cooperative agreement about them, then it's feared that wouldn't be dramatic enough.

Better to pit several of the trashiest, dumbest, loudest, and most shriekingly hostile idiots you can find against each other, preferably having them crassly compete for a goal of money or finding a mate, and stepping on one another. A recent National Public Radio piece strung together several dozen of these contestants, from different shows, "coincidentally" all saying the same line: "I'm not here to make friends." "I'm not here to make friends."

This practice, then, has seeped into the wider culture, and Americans now CONSTANTLY find ways to make enemies out of one another out of every perceived slight, instead of assuming the best of one another and making a friend. One shouldn't assume goodwill of everyone, of course, but as an American, I can tell you that the suspicion and hostility in our society has grown to a rather preposterous, exaggerated extent, quite unnecessarily. It bodes very badly for our ability to come together and cooperate, when we will need to do so. TV executives will tell you they bear no responsibility. Hm.

Kris Chari | November 5 3:56pm | [Permalink](#)

[Report](#)

Is this a fit article for FT to publish?

Freedom to choose, is that by which I live, cherish and die and not to be lectured to what I should think, act and do

Ranjit Nambiar | November 5 12:28pm | [Permalink](#)

[Report](#)

In the end Mr Malkani, the people with freedom to choose win, always! Thought & morality police has been tried before, always ended in disaster. Just pick up a history book from wherever your nearest bookshop with intellectual freedom is, er sorry, you might have to fly to Delhi if you are sitting in Beijing.

I disagree with what you are saying but I defend your right to say it I also disagree with reality TV but in the name of liberty, I'll defend to death the right of any moron who chooses to watch it. I'll also note my surprise that an enlightened Indian like you chose to criticise the country on the one thing that we should be proud, an unbroken tradition of free speech and expression. There's so many other things we can criticise that the triteness of your article would surprise me even if it was in The Telegraph

User 7446999 | November 5 10:26am | [Permalink](#)

[Report](#)

This is a ridiculous article, even if it's supposed to be humorous and not a kind of post-colonial Leavisite rant. China's crackdown on the voting shows has more to do with the fear of democracy and western-style gender equality of the ruling elite. This is part of the same move that will see microblogging sites more closely monitored by the state and has already manifested an upswing in chauvinist propaganda. To call this "the broadcasting equivalent of broccoli" trivializes a serious issue.

Charles Liu | November 5 9:50am | [Permalink](#)

[Report](#)

@Oligarch

There is a Chinese edition of the FT in China, and a Chinese edition of the Wall Street Journal and a Chinese edition of business week. Many articles are translations of the English editions' articles as well as reports of issues of local interest.

In my twenty some years of living in China, one thing stands out as to relations to the West- there is intense curiosity among the populace on what is out there in the rest of the world and active interest in learning about it. The reverse, however, is nearly nonexistent.

ush2 | November 5 8:39am | [Permalink](#)

[Report](#)

The censorship has my full support. I think developing countries allow too much TV time for entertainment, which subtly shapes their outlook and attitude towards consumerism and triviality. The West are rich enough to indulge in that to afford to look upon that as a small price to pay for liberalism but most developing countries have a lot of catching up to do in terms of human capital, among others.

The Chinese authorities should consider adopting the BBC model. It has produced a lot of world-class documentaries and dramas that are mind-enriching. They should also pick some of the programmes produced by the Open University. Those are highly educational as well as high in entertainment value. One US PBS director valued them so much that, in response to criticism about his Anglophile bias, he said if there was no BBC there was no PBS. He could have said that again.

David Mar | November 5 7:38am | [Permalink](#)

[Report](#)

For God's sake, why can't you just leave law-abiding people alone? Life is difficult enough as it is - if they want a few hours of mindless entertainment each day, in between eight hours of work and their

domestic chores, let them have it.

TheOligarch.Com | November 5 7:33am | [Permalink](#)

[Report](#)

The Chinese need a more harmonious approach to enlightenment - they need a carrot as well as a stick. Where is the Chinese version of the FT? God how I hunger for some properly intelligent commentary. The People's Daily is like The UK Times with the trash knocked out of it with a stick, but when the worthy have turned around to face the light instead of the dark, where is the sweet crystal clear carrot of reason to take us into heaven?

swoosh | November 5 2:46am | [Permalink](#)

[Report](#)

I for once, have never watched any so called "reality shows". In fact, I despise them. The only "reality shows" that I could tolerate are the candid camera kind.

AK+ | November 5 12:55am | [Permalink](#)

[Report](#)

I have noticed recently several articles in the FT written by the Indians about China.

Why are the FT editors doing that? Are they playing the traditional imperialist games with those countries?

Charles Liu | November 5 12:21am | [Permalink](#)

[Report](#)

Wonderful piece. Aside from the cultural facets which are aptly described, there are serious ramifications on the political side as well. Readers of the FT are probably a more intellectual and educated crowd that are often seen in the commentaries lamenting the shallowness of electorates. As an observer from afar, I have gathered the impression that the boob tube has done more than its share in dumbing down the Western, especially the American electorate into thinking in soundbytes. The world today is increasingly complex and transforming rapidly. It requires serious thinking and consideration of multifaceted variable. Sound bytes do not do it.