Technocapitalist (tele)vision:
The Wideshows and Infomercials in Japanese Television

Hakan Ergül
Anadolu Üniversitesi
İletişim Bilimleri Fakültesi

Abstract:

This paper adopts widely used ethnographic methodologies and a critical political economic approach to investigate a highly commercialized form of communication on Japanese television so-called *Wideshow*. The *Wideshow* is a unique form of infotainment and consists of two constants: Entertainment and information. In the political economic tradition, this paper demonstrates the decisive role that economic considerations and (economic-based) power relations exert on production and distribution processes of *Wideshows*, thus greatly influencing televisual content. The powerful role economy plays emerged from my intensive participant observations in *MTV* and *NTV* studios. Interview data with performers and producers underscores the centrality of commodified knowledge. My data shows how commodified knowledge is dressed within local and cultural elements. The *Wideshow* acts as a medium for carefully-crafted commercial messages: Extended ads that package the material world of the audience into a homey televisual atmosphere. Importantly, the economic intentions of the TV station, though present; are carefully disguised. Although the post-production staff rejects the determinative effect of power relations on their broadcasting routine, observations expose how institutional tie-ups between the TV station and sponsoring companies inescapably shape televisual content. The heavy tabloidization of the program content and increasing amount of infotainment, I argue, is another immediate conduit between what the audience agency and the material/commercial world. This study, then, demonstrates the many ways in which commodified forms of mediated knowledge function in Japanese society today, through its most-popular communication form, on its most consumed medium, television.

Keywords: Japanese television, media ethnography, political economy, informercials, hybrid genres.

Teknokapitalist (Tele)vizyon: Japon Televizyonlarında Wideshow'lar ve Bilgi-Reklam

Özet:

Etnografik veri toplama yöntemlerinden yararlanılan bu çalışmada, Japon televizyon yayıncılığının hızla tecimselleşen türlerinden *Wideshowların* üretim süreçleri, eleştirel ekonomi-politik yaklaşımla incelemektedir. Japon televizyonlarına özgü bir tür olan (ancak son yıllarda yakın içeriklere çevre ülkelerde de rastlanan) *Wideshow*, kültürel açıdan özgün bir *infotainment* (bilgi-eğlence) içeriğine karşılık gelmektedir. Çalışmada, televizyon kanallarının ekonomik kaygılarının ve (ekonomi-temelli) güç ilişkilerinin bu türün üretim-dağıtım aşamaları ve program içerikleri üzerindeki belirleyici etkileri tartışılmaktadır. Üretim aşamasında ekonominin oynadığı rolü açığa çıkaran veriler, iki televizyon kanalında (*MTV* ve *NTV*) yapılan yoğun katılımalı gözlemlerle elde edilmiştir. Bu verilerden yola çıkılarak, tecimselleşmiş bilginin bu televizyon türü için yaşamsal bir öneme sahip olduğu, söz konusu şey'leştirilmiş bilginin, yerel, ulusal, kültürel ve teknik öğelerin bir arada kullanıldığı stratejilerle üretildiği ileri sürülmektedir. *Wideshowlar*, bir anlamda, tecimsel iletilerin program içeriklerine dikkatlice yerleştirildiği birer araç işlevi görmektedirler: İzleyicileri çevreleyen maddi dünya, aile ortamını andıran telegörsel bir atmosferle yeniden paketlenerek sunulmaktadır. Ancak bu stratejilerin uygulanması aşamasında, televizyon kanallarının ekonomik amaçları özenle gizlenmektedir. Güç ilişkilerinin yayın rutinleri üzerindeki belirleyici etkisi post-prodüksiyon biriminde görevli personel tarafından reddedilse de, yapılan görüşmeler ve gözlemler, televizyon kanalı, sponsor şirketler ve ortaklar arasındaki kurumsal bağlılıkların *Wideshow* içeriğini doğrudan ve kaçınılmaz olarak şekillendirdiğini göstermektedir. İzleyici ve maddi/tecimsel dünya arasındaki bir başka kanal ise telegörsel içerikte belirgin biçimde gözlemlenen tabloidleşmedir. Japonya'da en çok izlenen televizyon türüne ve en çok tüketilen kitle iletişim aracına odaklanan bu çalışma, telegörsel olarak dolayımlanan tecimsel bilginin Japon toplumunda üstlendiği işlevleri tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: japon televizyonu, medya etnografisi, ekonomi politik, bilgi-reklamlar, melez türler.

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It was Friday, around 3 pm, in a wide, dim room. "Actually, we all try hard to get rid of these demands as quickly as possible..." said the man, in his early 40s, "We... never like it, but there is nothing we can do, (except) finish our job and get the matter behind us." A few minutes later, in the same, murky place, two guys, appearing younger and inferior to the other man, were chatting about a product that they thought unacceptably overpriced: "Are these people really buying (that kind of stuff)? These are too expensive! Just a waste of money..." The guy sitting next to him replied: "It is a waste of money "for you" ... but not for people with money." Sounds like a script of an organized crime network discussing a product they don't feel comfortable marketing, but can't avoid trucking in? Perhaps in a thriller? In fact, no.

The actual place this conversation occurred was in the post-production studio of the top-rated TV program, in Sendai, Japan. The script above refers to the multi-dimensional phenomena in contemporary Japanese TV broadcasting - what I will call commodification of (televised) knowledge in this paper. It is this pervasive, powerful practice that lies at the heart of this paper. To assist in your understanding, a little information might be helpful: The main character of the story is a producer of a local program and also one of my key informants. What he was denouncing was the economic power relations by which the station -as well as his

program's televisual content - is strongly tied to. The younger members of the production team were joking about the commercial information which, though hidden, is inescapably - and reflexively- affected by those same power relations. What they were speaking against and viewing critically was a "corner" (or particular segment of their TV show) which was intentionally placed at the opening of the *Wideshow* -a multipurpose news, opinion, variety and talk show that is a major part of daily Japanese TV-, I was observing. That "corner" was not merely a one-off; it has appeared on the small monitors of the post-production studio over the course of the last decade, from Monday to Friday. Those economic bonds that "they (producers) never like", nevertheless, cannot be ignored, for they are as old as the TV station for which they work.

This picture takes us to the long-familiar sphere where "ownership and support mechanisms (e.g. advertising)... influence media behavior and content" (McChesney, 2000: 110). The aim of this paper is to analyze the political-economic components (e.g. ownership/sponsorship mechanisms, advertising, audience research, and tabloidization) of the picture via ethnographic data to demonstrate the decisive role that economic tie-ups and (economic-based) power relations exert on production and distribution processes (Mosco, 1996) of *Wideshows*, thus greatly influencing televisual content.

The powerful role economy plays emerged from widely used ethnographic methodologies such as intensive participant observations, in-depth semi-structured interviews, content analyzed field notes, and the long-term observations of the broadcasting content. The data covers two TV studios: "Miyagi Terebi" (*MTV*) in Sendai (the 12th largest city in Japan, and the largest in the northern region of Honshû)[2] and "Nihon Terebi" (*NTV*) in Tokyo. Interview data with performers and producers alike, underscores the centrality of "commodified knowledge". By this I mean that much *Wideshow* content is recodified by (hidden) commercial components and routinized through the program "corners". It also shows how commodified knowledge is dressed within cultural elements that are both local and national in nature.

To better understand this phenomenon of broadcasting, the following questions are of particular importance: (1) What are the most common strategies of commercial information transmission in the *Wideshows*? (2) How do these strategies change (if at all) when comparing local and national scales? (3) What happens behind the screen and how -and in what ways- do economic considerations affect "the modes of cultural production?" (Garnham, 1979: 123) (4) How does commodified televisual content, through which economic considerations are satisfied, get decorated in cultural elements? Put differently, for "the consumers of (the) mediated commercial sphere" (Nightingale, 2004: 235), what is it that the *Wideshow* promises, therefore making it the most viewed genre on Japanese TV? And finally, (5) what has this contemporary format of (commercial) communication come to mean in an advanced capitalist society in which "(m)edia have... increased the tendency toward consumerism?" (Eisenstadt, 1996: 438). Specifically, for Japan, this has meant assisting in its transformation into a society "of hyper-consumption" (Clammer, 2000: 204).

This study, then, demonstrates the many ways in which commodified forms of mediated knowledge function in Japanese society today, through its most-popular communication form, on its

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Throughout the paper, the Japanese long vowels are indicated by macron as â, ê, î, ô, û. However, familiar names such as Tokyo have been rendered without macrons as is customary. Following convention, the titles of the TV programs included in this study (e.g. *OH! Ban Desu! THE Waido*) are written as they are used in the actual programs. The translations from Japanese to English in this study are mine; hence any errors in translation are the author's own.

most consumed medium, television (Holden, 2004: 1210). The next section begins with decoding the key term *Wideshow* (or, *waido-shô*, as called in Japanese).

The *Wideshow*: A Televisual Hybrid

Before proceeding, the reader should note that there is no agreement on what the *Wideshow* exactly is. My interview data revealed that even production team members (six producers, in total) have differing ideas about possible definitions of the same program. One result is that the genre definitions traditionally applied in television studies are no longer capable of delineating what is actually there on the screen. The time of the program and shifting communication strategies, on the other hand, are other variables. As one of the chief producers of *NTV* argued: "There were different programs (in the past) from which today's *Wideshow* were born, but, when we say *Wideshow* today, we understand something different." In this section, I would like to describe what the contemporary *Wideshow* looks like and what is "different" about it.

Debuting in 1966, the *Wideshow* has operated in Japan longer than in any other country and become one of the most preferred forms of programming in Japanese television (Asada, 1987). Even today it captures the widest audience, and constitutes the largest share among daily broadcasting (Kamimura et. al., 2000). The *Wideshow* consists of two constants: Entertainment and information -an approach that has proliferated in Western TV broadcasting (Ergül, 2005; Gencel Bek, 2004; Hartley, 2001; Golding & Murdock, 2000), as well as Japan (Hagiwara, 2001; Ishita, 2001; Kawabata, 2001). In the latter country, however, the *Wideshow* stands out as a unique form of "infotainment". What I mean by this is that the *Wideshow* is ontologically "infotainment" incarnate (Holden & Ergül, 2006), insofar as its content is based on the intentional mixture of information and entertainment. In terms of conventional genre definitions, however, the entire content is structured by a

specific TV format, which is culturally Japanese and does not exist in the Western TV archipelago. Most of these shows last longer than two and even up to three hours, and take the biggest portion in the total broadcasting time on any one station. A formatic hybrid (Ergül, 2004a; Kawabata, 2002) "infotainment" functions through a variety of border-skipping "corners" (i.e. how-to, news, docutainment, travel, happy-talk, weather forecast, city information, etc.).

The corners are all placed within the same *Wideshow*, broadcast from the same studio by the same announcers. Even the guests appearing on *Wideshows* of different stations, at different times, are often the same. In this way, these personnel are more like a family or a club, whose members are jumping from channel to channel. For instance, one of the guests appeared in a morning *Wideshow* discussing the matter of Japanese adolescences committing the crime may also appear on another *Wideshow* later that the same day, talking about the latest trends in fashion.

The next two sections offer a brief overview about the TV stations and the programs, respectively. Following each descriptive section I will discuss the issues emerged from a large amount of observational data pertaining to the highly commodified knowledge that course through and apparently construct each *Wideshow*.

Miyagi Terebi and "*OH! Ban Desu!*"

"Miyagi Terebi" (*MTV*) is one of four local TV stations in Sendai and was established in 1970 as a local branch of "Nihon Terebi" (*NTV*). The broadcasting area is limited to Miyagi prefecture and is viewed by almost 860,000 householders a day. The entire televisual content is broadcast live and shares about 4.3 hours of daily transmission time with the mother station, *NTV*.

The program, "OH! Ban desu!",[3] is similar with other *Wideshows* that the Japanese audiences are used to seeing locally and

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This title comes from the local Miyagi dialect a word meaning "good evening." Semiotically speaking, this title and opening signifies from the outset that the program clearly delineates geo-centric borders. Starting from this local way of greeting, it not only communicates its "localness" to the local audiences but also promises them a familiar roof under which they all can come together.

nationally. The program is broadcast from Monday to Friday, starting at 3:50 p.m. It is the top-rated program of the four television channels in Sendai. "OH! Ban desu!" first aired over 10 years ago, in April, 1995. As the most-viewed program on *MTV*, it takes the biggest portion of total broadcasting, slightly more than 3 hours in a day.

The Economics of "*OH! Ban desu!*": Corner-*ing* the Audience

For "OH! Ban desu!" locality is indispensable. The entire program content -including the news report- is based on the notion of localness.[4] The data that emerged from my interviews and observations revealed that this localized stress is carefully crafted into the program content and has been the result of an extensive trial-and-error process. As the producer Watanabe (*pseudonym*) said, "following the "viewing graphics" (*bangumi monitâ*) every morning, (we realized that) some blocks of the program were losing audience."

After this unsuccessful beginning, they checked the program minute by minute and learned that the segments that centered on local information always managed to obtain higher ratings. By the end of the program's first year, they increased the local information in each "corner" and put some "local flavor" into the entire content.

More than this, as I will show, commodified knowledge is dressed within local and cultural elements via the various *corners* of the program. By this I mean that the program's corners are reproduced by reference to hidden commercial components and routinized through the program segments. There are specific corners designed for this purpose such as "honobono kicchin" (*heartwarming kitchen*), "maru toku jôhô" (*useful [discount] information*), "machi no umaimon" (*delicious dishes/restaurants in the city*), "osusume spotto jôhô" (*recommended information about discounted products*) or "ekimae hôsô" (*details for the events, restaurants, exhibitions, movies and also weather forecast, broadcast in front of the main train stations*).

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What we are exposed through the entire content is actually "our home-town" we live in: The arcades we walk through everyday, the restaurants we pass by, the shopping centers or the local foods we are familiar with... Even the main announcer of the program is a famous "local" singer in his 50s (Satô Muneyuki) we meet everyday via the program during the last ten years.

The commercial information broadcast in these corners does not look like advertisements. Rather, it is more like a mixture of entertainment content and shopping tips, often broadcast by reporters in the street or in an otherwise intimate atmosphere. Basically, what the reporters appear to be doing is informing the audience about the best shops where material for the cooking corner can be bought, or else the cheapest restaurants offering a special discount for women costumers, or else trade-fairs that are open to public and so on...

Considering their weight in the program, I can say that these are the essential components that the program is built on. Watanabe said the reason that they broadcast such information is to reclaim audiences, who are housewives in their 40s or 50s. This gender component is important and it can only be analyzed in a wider picture of consumption since

> *(w)omen have been, and still are, key figures in Japan's consumer culture -not only because they are their country's greatest spenders, but also because they form a group which has been most carefully observed, analyzed and defined in marketing discourses* (Skov & Moeran, 1995: 3).

Osakini ban desu: "We always find some new (commercial)-thing for you!"

The segment, "Osakini ban desu", at the outset of the program could be considered a "pure" commercial corner -if not one extended advertisement produced by the show, itself. The announcer appearing in this corner is Nagamine Ryô, a man in his early 30s. He is a cheerful, energetic character, usually reporting from outside the studio. We always see him dressed in casual clothes, running with a cameraman on the streets, finding some restaurants with special features, talking to people on the street, testing the foods in place of and on behalf of the audience, promoting the places or trade-fares and, continuously, inviting the audience to visit the places he is visiting. In order to do this, of course, detailed information about the location of the place must be

broadcast several times. Behind this intimate and warm invitation, however, there are economic intentions very cleverly packed with what can be termed "carefully crafted spontaneity" (Holden & Ergül, 2006). Such intentional construction is beyond the view of the audience.

This happens, for instance, whenever Nagamine introduces a specific restaurant or a shopping center. With the aid of the camera, "we", the audience, walk alongside Nagamine for a while. During this short walk we hear as he talks about the visible features of the street: the surrounding houses, gardens, people passing by, etc. This may take but 5 to 10 seconds, and then, all of a sudden, Nagamine "happens" to spot this restaurant or that small shop along the way -usually, with a display of great surprise. Then the well-known ritual takes place: "Do you also see what I've found here? (to which the announcer and the host in the main studio reply)... "Look" Nagamine continues, "it is written here on the window that they 'serve the best ramen at the cheapest price!' How is that possible?.." Speaking to the announcer in the main studio, Nagamine asks, somewhat rhetorically: "You don't think I would miss this, do you? Let's go in there and check it out together!"

Again, acting as if this is the first time he has encountered the place, Nagamine enters. As all of us in the post-production studio know, however, this is actually not the case. To my query about whether this is contrived, Watanabe laughed: "Yes, this is the way it works... We tell the audience that we have never been there, but actually someone 'must' go (there before) and let the owner of that place know (that we hope to visit). For the shooting, we need an appointment, as well as permission. The program is live, so we must be careful". The time that they prefer to go for shooting depends on the place that will be introduced. In the case of shopping centers, the producer said, they prefer to go at times that big crowds are there. "If not," he said "...people see there is no one there and they may believe that the place is not popular at all."

Back to the issue about commercialized information, at one point I observed that Nagamine was in an exhibition for luxury cars and also sea vehicles. It was a local fair located near the city center. He was walking or running around the exhibition, giving details on the prices and also making jokes about the features of the products (see figure 1). While he was offering all these details, as well as recommending that the audience come see the exhibition, the post-production staff in the sub-studio were laughing and talking about how impossible it was to buy such products.

Figure 1. Nagamine, in a cheerful mode, is explaining the exceptionally superior feature of the products in an exhibition. On the screen is a colorful phrase "warashibe ryô ja" - including the first name of the announcer (Ryô)-, basically referring to the Japanese folk tale, "warashibe chôja" (The Straw Millionaire).

After ten minutes of broadcasting, the first segment of the program -"osakini ban desu"- finishes. One would think that there is nothing special about this segment. After all, this is a private TV channel and they have to find a way to support their endeavor. In short, they must find a balance in programming that attracts both the sponsors and the audiences. However, the wider picture which emerged during the latter part of my interviews (as well as informal observation and chats with the post-production team) led to the view that there is more to be gleaned from this dimension of broadcasting.

During the segments in which Nagamine appears, a discerning viewer could recognize that the reporter always talks about brand-names, new products, trade-fairs or restaurants. This led me to wonder whether this was not a sort of hidden advertisement, in itself. When I inquired, Watanabe replied:

> *Sometimes what we do is just like a PR. This sort of commercial content has increased in time. We realized that our audiences want to be advised about their material environment as well. So, everyday we must find something new about restaurants, exhibitions, shopping centers in Sendai...*

In this we see how the producers have devised some presuppositions about their audience: that they "like" commercial information and actually want more. Moreover, if it is local commercial information, then that is even better. When I sought clarification as to the basis for this supposition, Watanabe reminded me the "program monitor" (i.e. the commercial company which offers detailed graphic data on ratings and shares) is consulted every day. He stated

> *When we start giving this kind of (local commercial) information, we get a higher rating. The audience wants to know which shopping center in Sendai is more convenient or from which department store they can get better deals for particular products...*

While he insisted that there is no financial connection between his program's "PR-like" content and the companies, he did confirm that this commercial information makes up the biggest portion of the broadcasting content of "OH! Ban desu!"

During the later stages of my research, when our rapport was a bit stronger, I again inquired whether there is a financial connection between certain kinds of events and the TV station. The answer he then offered was slightly different. He acknowledged that "sometimes... there is this sort of relation with the sales department of Miyagi Terebi." And a little later, when I asked what kind of connections those are. Watanabe indicated the screen with his head and wanted me to take a look at what was there. On the display, Nagamine was standing in front of a car exhibited in the local fair (see figure 2). It was the latest and most luxurious model of a well-know automobile giant. After informing us about the unique features, price and technical advantages of the car, Nagamine chose to close the "corner" of that day's show with the car directly behind him, in full audience view. "This exhibition,"

Watanabe informed me, "was organized by (the company whose car Nagamine was standing in front of)." Watanabe admitted that this company and the program's parent -*Miyagi TV*- have strong economic ties. The company, organizing the exhibition is also a station shareholder. "It is this company" he repeated,

> *so, we have no other alternative (but to broadcast it). No way to avoid it... If they want to see their product on the screen, it is you - "the producer"- who should find a way to satisfy their demand.*

During the course of my observation, other supplementary details proved that the producers are actually "informed" by these companies in advance about "how" exactly they want the product to be broadcast.

Figure 2. The scene shows Watanabe in an exhibition for luxury cars.

Put differently, they actively, join in the production process. As Mosco (1988: 6) argues in his work on "the pay-per society," the advertisers or sponsors "go on to pressure program producers to shape their work for an audience of likely consumers". One important detail, underscoring the centrality of the political economic dimensions of the *Wideshow* is that after the new broadcasting schedule was introduced in April 2005, when the time devoted to this corner (*osakini ban desu*) was increased from 10 minutes to an hour. This means that the local commercial information broadcast in this corner is now six times larger than before.

The Cooking Corners: How Would You Like to Have Your Hometown Baked?

So too, does this heavy commercial stress continue in the other corners of the program. For instance, in the cooking corner, (called, *honobono kicchin*), similar commercial strategies are applied. What we observe in this corner is the main announcer, the female host, appears with a guest audience member, who offered a recipe. Often it is a "local" dish, recommended by a "local" audience member and cooked with "local" materials. But, how can we find the ingredients? We shouldn't be worried about this: they not only offer the recipe details, but also a video tape including all the details of the shop which offers the ingredients at the best price. As figure 3 shows, the name of the shops and the brands are not considered to be ads, and, therefore, are broadcast openly, without compensation.

This commercial information is often blended with intimate human-stories, for instance covering who the boss of the establishment is; whether it is a family enterprise or part of a franchise; how old the owner was when the shop opened; whether it is an original brand... and so on. The conversation, of course, will not stop here; more is needed to attract the audience. How about a healthy message from the owner's wife? Or a small gift she can offer to the audience who saw this broadcast and arrives there within ten minutes? What if a big crowd arrives here in minutes?

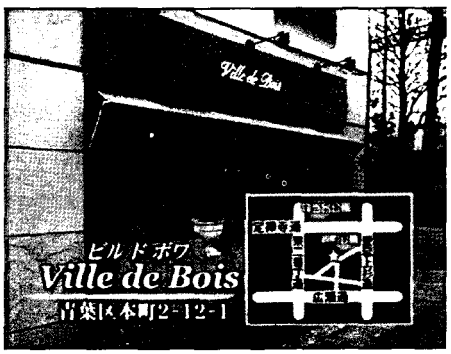

Figure 3. The name of restaurant and the location details are broadcast openly.

Any discount tickets for all the customers for a short period? The boss pretends as if this might be too troublesome, but the audience knows (having watched this type of show so often) that s/he has no chance but to accept the request.

What we usually do not know, my interview data revealed, is that this happens through a process of negotiation carried out between the station and the company to be introduced over a number of weeks. The station will offer a considerable amount of broadcast time and the company, in return, will give a discount/gift/free invitation to the show's audience. This is not a rare strategy for daytime broadcasting. As Skov and Moeran (1995: 2) explain: "During the daytime, television stations put on special programmes... and gather audiences of women to applaud, laugh, talk at appropriate points and to receive, if they are lucky, special rewards in the form of advertised stockings, sauces, soaps, shampoos".

One another example is a competition among the local affiliates of *NTV*. It is a food competition, called "koraborêshon bentô" (*lunch box collaboration*), introduced by six TV stations in Tôhoku area in 2005: Through the *Wideshows* broadcast in their prefecture, the target audiences recommend the best food of their hometown to manage to make it one of the side dishes in the Tôhoku's lunch box. We can't simply assume that the audiences, as

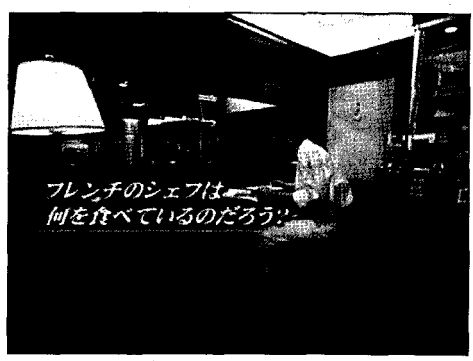

Figure 4. The superimposed subtitle prepares the audience for the story: "What is the chief of the French restaurant eating?"

decision makers of the process, will not be able to taste their local as well as original "lunch box" -of Tôhoku-, which is basically the result of their cooperation with the *Wideshows*. When the competition ended, the lunch box was available in the nearest "Sunkus", a well-known convenience store franchise, spread all over Japan. During the course of the competition, the audiences are captured, at least, in three different levels of the economic process: the target viewers of the program through which the TV stations are obtaining their economic sources (sponsors, ads, etc.); the active participants as well as decision makers of the production process (collaborative event); and finally, the buyers/customers of the market.

And Now, for the Weather Forecast: Scattered Discounts, Sunny Exhibitions!

There is a large amount of data confirming the strong economic tie-ups between the TV station and the (local) commercial sources which, of course, reciprocally relates to the localization and commodification of televisual content. Consider the other corner of the program, called *ekimae hôsô*. This segment, as its name indicates, is broadcast in front of the main train station every day.

This short segment features the weather forecast, reported by the same female announcer each time. The reader should note that, in Japan, the train stations are the most crucial part in city planning.

Figure 5. Sendai "ekimae hôsô." Her role is twofold: Announcing the details of the weather forecast and offering commercial information.

For one thing, the city center is invariably built around the main station. The encounter with the train station comes to signify that one is in the very center of the market place, comprised of the most popular shopping centers, famous restaurants, well-know brands, numerous coffee shops and travel agencies.

As for the TV program, it is through this corner that the viewer learns not only the latest details about of the weather, but also the latest information on current events, useful products, new discounts, movies, concerts, foods or beverages from all over the broadcast area (figures 5 and 6). Again, none of this information is considered to be commercial information: neither a subtitle, nor a genre indicator or special announcement is available to warn the audience about what they actually are being exposed to... Instead, what the viewer sees is a few smiling people standing behind the weather reporter, holding placards full of details about a product they want to introduce; so, too, do they experience the female announcer interviewing the placard-holders, as well as the people passing by.

This can be considered to be another contribution to the intimate communication tropes, which reduce distance between seller and potential buyer via carefully-crafted commercial messages. In this section, I discussed some of the ways in which local televisual content is reformulated to a great extend to conform with commodified knowledge. I also showed how the local media

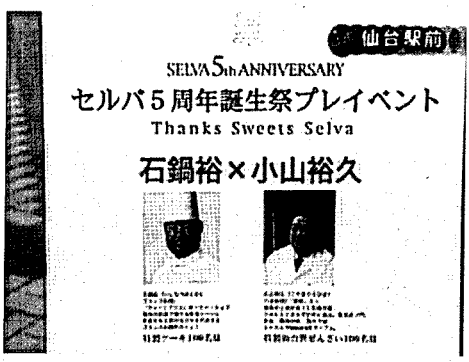

Figure 6. The latest information on current events, movies, concerts, foods or beverages and more from all over the broadcast area is available at this corner.

professionals meet audience's needs through the broadcast content in which economic priorities are carefully embedded. Some of these priorities belong to official underwriters of the show; others are held by those who don't sponsor the show, but who the show's producers have decided to support (for whatever reasons). The central dynamics of this phenomenon are based on well-known, archaic reasoning - so-called "mutual benefit": The audiences get useful information that they are looking for, while the program obtains the highest rating among its rivals. What happens to the televisual content heavily shaped by economic policies and power relations, on the other hand, seems to be a question hovering out there in no man's land.

One might fairly ask whether this is simply a function of locality -the fact that this program exists in a particular, insular economic ecology, a finite realm of economic actors and an established history of institutional actors, subject to fixed relations. What happens, one might wonder, if we were to shift our focus from a local *Wideshow* limited to Miyagi prefecture to one broadcast all over Japan? How do the organizational characteristics affect this particular genre, its over-all economics and televisual content? How and in what ways does this contemporary method of information transmission mediate between the audience and its economic sources? In the following section, I would like to deal with these questions.

NTV and the Economics of "*THE Waido*"

NTV and "*THE Waido*"

NTV, established in 1952 in Tokyo, is the mother station and the headquarters of *"Nippon Television Network"*, which is comprised of 33 affiliates spread throughout the country and 13 international news bureaus located on four continentals. Regarding the content spectrum, audience share and ratings,[5] *"NTV"* is certainly one of the most popular nation-wide private enterprises

5
For detailed information, see the available http://www.ntv.co.jp/english/pc/index.html (Access date: 12 December 2006).

among the other key TV stations (e.g. *Fuji TV, TBS, TV Tokyo* and *TV Asahi*) that are located in Tokyo.

"The Waido" is a nation-wide program, which began broadcasting two years before "OH! Ban Desu!" (in April 1993). The program could be classified as an "information-*Wideshow*" (*jôhô-waidoshô*) since the program's content is aimed more at informing and less on entertaining. From Monday to Friday it is on the air from 1:50 p.m. to 3:50 p.m. and obtains the highest ratings of all four TV stations, mentioned above. The descriptive features of the program are hidden in the title: "The Waido" or "The Wide". According to the chief producer Murakami (pseudonym)

> *it is all about the content... It means that we broadcast news about politics, economics, society, life-style and also "g_n_kai" (the Japanese world of show business)... Just like other Wideshows... Many genres are covered by the same program... This is why we call it 'wide'.*

Just as the local program studied here, "The Waido" also has different corners associated with the central (i.e. news) component. These include "jinbutsu waido" (*which covers soft news about stars, events, idols, etc.*), "nyûsu totte dashi" (*short news reports on a variety of issues*) and "watashi wa dare?" (*"Who am I?" the quiz corner, which is placed at the end of the program*). To create this boarder-crossing content, a big team is required and much energy is devoted to the process. Five (main) producers (or "team leaders") work regularly for the program; two of these five carry the title "chief producer". The number of professionals working under them exceeds one hundred. This enormous production staff do not work daily; rather, they rotate based on the broadcast schedule. For every broadcast day, there is a "desk" designating which producers, assistants and technical staff are in charge. Every day, at least five people appear on the screen. A man, in his fifties, sitting in the center, is the main announcer and next to him is the female host. Three regular guests are always ready in the studio. And, depending on the issues covered, so, too, is there a (rotating) expert of the day.

In an earlier section of this paper, the term "commodified knowledge" was used. This refers to the localization of televisual content, embedded in hidden advertisements and the decisive power relations exerted on the program's content. In the case of "THE Waido", on the other hand, this term can be seen as relating more to the professionally structured elements of mediated content as well as to the media organization and its routinized practices (e.g. ratings/shares, digital audio-visual techniques, focus group research, agencies, the tabloidization of news content).

One notable detail is that, within this time slot, "THE Waido" is the only nation-wide program that has lasted for 12 years. Most rivals, in other words, have succumbed due to the severity of the competition (meaning the popularity of "THE Waido"). Over time, replacement shows have shifted their content in ways that resemble "THE Waido" in order to stay alive.[6]

But, why is that? What makes this televisual format so successful? Is there a relationship between broadcasting strategies and economic considerations, as we found in Miyagi? How different are the strategies employed in the nationwide program in Tokyo from those utilized in the local program "OH! Ban Desu!" In the following section, these questions will be discussed, focusing on the economic components in the broadcast context and ways that they affect program content.

Lost Within (Genre) Boundaries

To better understand today's "THE Waido", we should first take a close look at the background of the program. In this respect, Osaka, a densely populated city in Western Japan, factors highly into the discussion. This is because the story of "THE Waido" begins at Yomiuri TV, the local *NTV* affiliate in Osaka. Without question, the Kansai district, of which Osaka is the largest city, is the "entertainment capital" of Japan. In many respects[7] Osakā, is unbeatable with its long tradition of entertainment schools (e.g. such as "Yoshimoto Kôgyô", started in 1912) and consumption relating to the global giants of leisure (e.g. the Universal Studios).

6
The data was obtained from a file offered by the production members during my fieldwork in *NTV*.

7
Osaka is the second largest city in Japan. It is again the second most popular locus for international meetings, next to Tokyo. So too, is it the fourth most costly city of the world. See the available http://www.finfacts.com/costofliving4.htm (Access date: 11 February 2007).

Important to this section, show business in Japan (*geinôkai*) is dominated by performers of Kansai origin. It is said that if an entertainment program acquires a warm welcome from the Kansai audience, then no further evidence would be required to conclude that it "would" work at the national level as well. Therefore, most comedy or variety programs are tested in the Kansai area first (see Yokozawa, 2005: 232-233) before they are broadcast nation-wide.

These are the definitive features of the city from which the production team of "THE Waido" originated. Over the past decade, the program content has been produced by the same team. Before the program began broadcasting in 1993, there were two separate programs during the same time slot. In the words of Murakami, the chief producer: "One of the programs we broadcast was called 'The Two O'clock Wide' (*Niji no Waido*)." But, was it different from today's 'THE Waido'? "It 'was' quite different... In that program, we mostly offered useful tips about daily life or information about performers in show business (*geinôjin*)." By contrast, he continued, the second one "was a news program, including information about politics, economics, society, accidents,...and so on. We put them together and created today's 'THE Waido'... That's why it is called 'waido' (wide)" True, but not complete.

What Murakami forgot to mention was the effect of the top-rated program by rival TBS, called The Super Wide (*Sûpâ Waido*). It had the aim of competing against this strong rival and reclaiming audience share[8] which was the real commercial motivation for the station to speed up for the process of creating "THE Waido".

What is significant in this discussion is understating the origins of "THE Waido", as well as the forces that led to the internal configuration of its "corners". The program's almost undefinable content is indeed the result of one historical and commercial fact: "THE Waido" was born from two genres, each belonging to different families that were fused for strategic reasons. One result is that, today, neither the producers nor the audience[9] is perfectly sure about how to go about categorizing what is actually viewed on the

8
This data comes from an unpublished file offered by the production staff that overviews the historical background of the program.

9
According to the recent audience (focus group) researches conducted in both Osaka and Tokyo, the audience seems undecided about the definition of the program. This is the main reason that, starting from 2004, the producers are eagerly seeking more concrete genre components to overcome the currant vagueness of the content.

screen. For instance, the head of the post-production unit referred to the program as an "information-variety program (*jôhô-baraetî*)" at the beginning of my interview with him, but later on, ended up calling it an "information-wide show (*hôdô-waidoshô*)." A more representative comment, however, came later when he offered: "It is no longer easy to say 'this is what it is'... In the past, it was easier though...The news was news. So, when you look at the program, the program would tell you what genre it belongs to..." But today, we have "THE Waido", of which unpredictability, itself, has turned out to be the main feature of the content.[10]

10
This ambiguity continues to the web-page of the program: while there is a home page including detailed, up-to-date information available for almost all programs, no details for *THE Waido* are offered on the *NTV*'s site. If the audience wants to know about today's story, then s/he has to tune it up.

Between the Audience and Market: Infotainment as Catalyst

No matter what the program is called, there are, however, two unvarying components always out there on the screen: entertainment and information. These two have never changed throughout the history of the program, although the balance between the two elements has drastically been redrawn. How was it in the past and how did it change over time? After mentioning that entertainment content increased in his program, Producer Hagiwara (pseudonym) explained: "Today, almost 60% of the program is information and the rest is entertainment."

What he is describing -if only unintentionally- is an increase in "infotainment" content which, I would argue can be shown to be prevailing across the spectrum of Japanese television. The notion that there has been a great "infotainizing" of televisual content in Japan is clear from Hagiwara's observation that the time devoted to news content today is no longer the same as that of the past, while the amount of entertainment is much larger. At the same time, and paradoxically, Hagiwara indicated that there is now more time allocated for news content, providing more space for entertainment.

The explanation for this seeming contradiction lies in this; according to the producer: "Our audiences are expecting us to broadcast more news about "geinôkai" (*the world of entertainment* /

show business)... That's why the news content related to the "geinôjin" (*entertainer/performer*) became larger." Yes, when he was talking about lengthening the broadcast time for the news, he, in fact, was referring to "the news" about show business in Japan and its ubiquitous actors - who appear every day, on every channel, in a variety of programs. The reason for this shift is, again, an archaic one: capturing the largest audiences. "When we broadcast information about 'geinôjin', the ratings of the program unbelievably change," he said, "so, we increased the amount of such information over time. Personally I believe that we should do this more."

Before we go further, I would like to offer a detail considering the rating issue. It is obviously one of the greatest pressures on media professionals and this is, of course, not unique to Japanese media milieu. In the case of *NTV*, on the other hand, this pressure is visible to anyone who enters the station's office area: Next to the elevators, on the walls, and through the corridors. The eye-catching, conspicuous posters (rating graphics), comparing the programs broadcast by *NTV* and other TV stations, are everywhere (figure 7).

The quote from Hagiwara, which underscores the significance of "geinôjin" as program content (i.e. entertainment content), is

Figure 7. Next to the elevators, on the walls, and through the corridors. The eye-catching, conspicuous posters, comparing the ratings of programs broadcast by *NTV* and other TV stations, are everywhere in *NTV*.

reminiscent of the way that the producers of "OH! Ban Desu!" spoke of the vital role of local information in communicating with their audience. Although Hagiwara argues that, today, 60% of the program content is devoted to more informative/news content, one would observe that the overall affect of this tabloidization (and I will offer further indicators of this tendency later) is visible in the entire content. In short, "THE Waido", which was held detailed information as its core component, has ended up devoting the majority of its content to entertainment-oriented, tabloid-style information. As will be detailed in the remainder of this section, this is all done to create an intimate communication with the audience (Painter, 1996).

Imagine this: The first news during the program's opening is the recent visit to Japan by the popular Korean artist "Bae Yong Joon" (or as called in Japan, *Yon-sama*).[11] Along with the story, there are long video taped pieces, including "Yon-sama's" airplane landing at the airport, catchy fragments abstracted from a popular drama he starred in, and emotional interviews with his devoted fans-in-wait, who are often crying in front of his hotel.

During the first 20 minutes, we repeatedly view the same looped footage: of him swimming, working out, greeting people,

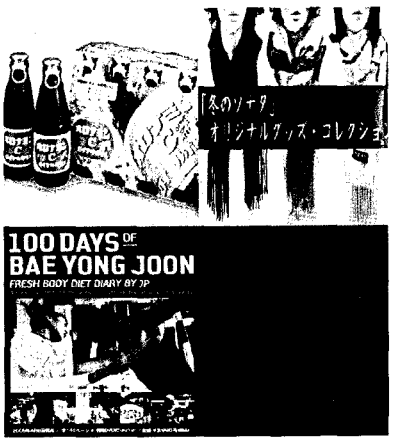

Figure 8. The mass mediated image of *Yon-sama* works for a variety of products: For garments (the scarves from "*Fuyu no Sonata*... original collection"), a TV guide magazine, an energy-drink... He is also the writer of a diet book called -though, not originally titled -"Yon-sama daietto" (*The Yon-sama Diet*).

11
In Japanese, "*-sama*" is the most formal honorific for addressing a person who is considered superior than oneself.

smiling and smiling again. The visual material for this "news" story actually arrives at the post-production unit just an hour before the program starts. If it hadn't, then the order of the news would have been quite different.

What the "Yon-sama" story replaced was news about "Takeshima Island" -a story of conflict between South-Korea and Japan, which has led to souring of international relations.

Young members of the production team, not involved in the decision taking process, reacted to this sudden change in a negative way: "'Yon-sama!' No, not again! How many times more do we have to broadcast this guy in the program?" But, if it is "Yon-sama", the most popular Korean idol in Japan, and if your target audience is also a major fan-base for his dramas, then vital political news, such as the "Takeshima Island" issue, is certainly sacrificeable. An idol, however, is never only an idol. Instead, s/he is an iconographic or symbolic code, which refers to the material world from numerous commercial angles. This material world is one that ensnares both idol and the audience, joining them in a fundamental embrace.

Looking at the "Yon-sama" case, for example, can we still argue that "Bae Yong Joon" is merely a talented actor in romantic dramas? Not for his audience in Japan... Indeed he, as many other foreign stars (Prieler, 2006), already became a larger than life figure with his own special appellation: "Yon-sama." An omnipresent star,

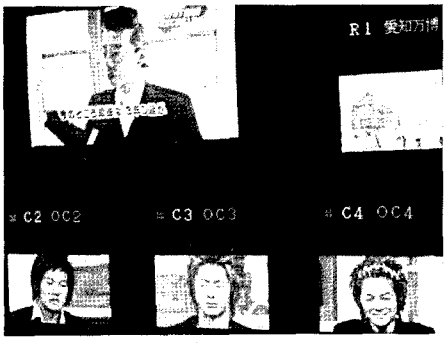

Figure 9. In the sub-studio, we see a VTR piece, showing the main actors of the drama, called "Gokusen." The voiceover announces to the fans that three popular idols will be arriving to the *NTV*-Tokyo station soon!

Figure 10. The "idols" arrived in an hour to the studio. The picture shows a large group of young people (fans), jumping, taking pictures, and screaming to show their admiration to the idols inside the studio. The station's shopping center, just a few meters far away from the group, is devoted to the popular garments appeared in the drama *Gokusen* as well as a variety of products on which the images of the idols are reprinted.

giving his warmest smile to his adoring audience, through countless advertisements, magazine stories, newspaper articles, and web-sites... This, on the other hand, does not change the fact that he is a (temporary) project designed and reproduced in media industries to serve different aspects of the market. Today, his smile is working for an energy-drink in an advertisement; tomorrow, the picture of his naked body is working for a life-style magazine; and next week, he is a writer of a diet book called -though, not originally titled- "Yon-sama daietto" (*The Yon-sama diet*).[12] Though a bit extreme, this is not an exceptional case, by any stretch of the imagination (see figure 8). So too, do other members of the "geinôkai", whose very existence depends on their performance on TV as well as the frequency with which they appear on the screen, work as accelerators -via strategies similar to those described above- between the mass mediated product and its faithful buyer, the audience (see figure 9).

12
The original title of the book is *100 Days of Bae Yong Joon*, published by BOF, Inc. in April 2005.

Marketing Studies: Blame on the Omnipotent Audience?

The decisions about the nature and shape of this commodified, tabloid content are rooted in assumptions about audience preferences -itself, a function of focus group interviews conducted on 500 subjects biannually in Osaka and Tokyo. Even the regular guests of the program are selected in accord with the findings of these marketing studies.

Then, who is the audience of "THE Waido?" How and in what ways does the audience profile affect the program content? According to Murakami (and in words very reminiscent of Sendai's producers), "They are basically housewives in their late 40s or 50s, some of them are retired or left their jobs right after they got married... The husband is not at home during the program broadcast... neither are the kids."

As anyone who views "THE Waido" a couple of times would realize, a considerable amount of the program's content (including all corners and the advertisement segments) refers to a larger area which does not seem to perfectly represent the target audiences' wants and wishes. Are these retired housewives, generally in their 50s, for instance, really interested in the latest rumors about the "geinôjin" or popular idols' love affairs? With whom does the news communicate, for instance, when it treats problems in primary school education? In the advertisement segments, one finds commercial information about life insurance, hair dyes or anti-aging cosmetics which, considering the viewer demographic, would make sense; but, who is the audience that the young couples in the advertisements are representing?..

At least part of the answer, I would contend, is hidden in the severe competition with another *Wideshow* -also the strongest rival: "Jasuto" (*The Just*), produced by TBS. Both programs air during the same time slot, however, their differing contents tend to communicate with different audience groups. In Hagiwara's words,

Compared to our program, "Jasuto" broadcast to a younger audience - I mean those in their early 30s that we categorize as "F-1" They are, again, the housewives or those who temporarily stopped working after they delivered a baby.

13
The program, *Jasuto*, ended with the beginning of the new broadcasting schedule, in March 2005.

Although Hagiwara -and also the producers- did not appear willing to talk either about their competitors or their policies against them, further inquiries with the production team revealed that they closely follow other programs broadcast in the same time slot. Indeed, they have up-dated data for their rivals and also detailed strategies aimed at keeping "THE Waido" ahead of the pack. Even more, with "Jasuto" soon to go off the air[13] "THE Waido" producers were hard at work thinking about the kind of new content they would need to attract "Jasuto's" previous audience, now hovering between channels while deciding which new program to tune into. Viewing this situation helps explain not only particular news content - for instance, new government educational policies of concern to young women - but also the increasing amount of televisual content that is soaked in images of the entertainment world.

The common element tying together "THE Waido's" content, its basis on audience research, the economic motives of the sponsors, and the material world surrounding the audience is commercialism. To see this, consider the "mediated commercial sphere" described by Nightingale (2004), in the following way:

Although the media may displace their responsibility to the public onto the public or onto government regulation, they take their responsibilities to advertisements very seriously indeed. To this end, they sponsor a form of audience research (ratings analysis) that, in effect, parcels audience viewing into sellable commodities. The result is that people participate in the mediated commercial sphere in two ways: as consumers and as audiences. They are buyers in the marketplace (external to the media), and they are viewers or listeners (inside the media system).

For those who are familiar with Japanese television, the immediate connection between the *Wideshow*'s commercial content and the market place will be clear; it is far from abstract, and

beyond surprise. The continuous, contiguous relationship exists everywhere: a direct line from the content inside the box and the nearest local supermarket, or a suburban mall. The audience (as consumer), for instance, will sooner or later figure out that some products in the market - which sat on a table with a colorful sign displaying the title of a TV program- sell out much faster. Furthermore, this tends to happen whenever a particular product is promoted via the "corner" of the *Wideshow*. Similarly, in cases where products are suddenly ignored by the *Wideshow*, there often is a market glut of that item where only recently there had been TV-influenced scarcity. Certainly, these associations are not controversial. It has been well-established that commercial considerations and economic mechanisms have the power to immediately influence media behavior (McChesney, 2000: 110) and therefore a program's content.

Discussions and Implications: An Ethnographic Look at "How" and "Why" of Media Production

Let me conclude with a few remarks about what has been covered in this paper. The major discussions, at least in my approach to the issue, can broadly be characterized as an attempt to the critical political economy of cultural production. My methodology, however, differs from much of the conventional studies in media sociology, which are more considered with the macro structures, functioning behind social phenomenon. I focused on the ways in which these holistic structures -i.e. economic tie-ups and power relations- exert influence on the social phenomenon at a micro level; how they operate in "actual" stage; and how they are perceived and reproduced by the media professionals. I did this by looking at what Williams (1980: 48) defined as "conditions of a practice" through the ethnographic data. Although the number of scholars who have come to recognize the value of ethnographic methods in political-economic analysis is increasing, the product of research, benefiting from the fruitful intersections of two fields, is still paltry. Conversely, I would wholeheartedly agree with Mosco's

(1996: 210) suggestion that "[t]here is nothing in the nature of ethnography that is inherently opposed to political economy". Storey's (2003: 61-62) reference to cultural studies completes the picture:

> *What is needed is a more inclusive, more tolerant cultural studies, one in which political economy and ethnography and audience studies can see themselves as contributing the same project, existing like two sides of the same sheet of paper, differently inscribed but inescapably bound together in a project of understanding and dismantling the relations between culture and power.*

This point was implicitly underpinned in this study, which profited much from the melding of ethnographic data and the political-economic approach. With its power in providing detailed documentation of "how" media products are constructed behind scenes, and "how" they are perceived by media professionals, ethnographic method, as I argued elsewhere (Ergül, 2004b), has a lot to offer in the field of communication.

Bargaining the "Home"

Before proceeding, let us remember what we encountered in this paper. First of all, we have seen numerous ways in which commodified (televisual) knowledge forms the core of Japan's *Wideshows*. Further, we have seen that this is true, both at the local (*MTV*) and national (*NTV*) levels. In case of local programming we observed, "OH! Ban Desu!" commodified knowledge is more connected to the geographic boundaries of the televisual content; it revolves around the commercialization of the audiences' "hometown".

From the program's opening until its closing, Miyagi prefecture is featured with its people, subject matter, physical nature, or economic sources. In this sense, the physical space is transformed into a televisual market place in which the audience is doubly captured: as viewers and consumers. This political-economic dimension -the economic intentions of the TV station- is

carefully disguised. What we see through the aggregation of corners is "our" city, an imaginary, though proximately real, and intimate realm: one that is carefully recodified via (disguised) commercial elements and delivered through the quasi-contiguous tropes of communication. It is this mediated wonderland, I would like to suggest, that is the very format of *Wideshow* through which the economic power relations function in contemporary Japanese TV.

Although the data considering this point is limited in scope, this tendency is certainly not unique to "OH! Ban Desu!" Indeed, other local (e.g. Nıji no Chaihane, Yoji Terebi) and national (e.g. Omoikkiri Terebi, Waido Sukuranburu) shows also broadcast a large amount of commercial information via the same "corner" strategy. Everyday, virtually on every channel, we meet "infomercials" - carefully wrapped in the form of tips about daily life, shopping advices, intimate human stories, "healthy" information, and so on- serving to attract the target audience: Intensely commodified information is an indispensable and unvarying characteristic of Japanese TV broadcasting, and is certainly not unique to local TV broadcasting. To better elucidate this point, let us go back to the *NTV* data.

Tabloid Tales

While the nature of "THE Waido" has much in common with the local program, "OH! Ban Desu!" the professional routines in which commodified knowledge is reproduced and normalized manifest considerable differences. As the program's history implies, "THE Waido" is a natural-born hybrid, a "wide"-family in which two conventional genres-in-law (news and entertainment) are brought together to create its most efficient communication tropes, "infotainment" and tabloidization. Crossing the traditional genre boundaries in such a way as to create an intimate -and commercial- communication with its nation-wide audience, "THE Waido" brings us a mediated sphere in which the economic motives of the sponsors meet the audiences' (as consumer) wishes.

It does this not only in the form of advertisement or sponsorship, but also in the form of news-"like", tabloid content, which seeks to appeal to the generally female audience via communicating information about (thereby playing to their preferences for) consumption. Virtually every broadcast day we come across news content, telling us dramatic, and sensational stories, as well as the latest gossip concerning "geinôkai" or "tarento". More importantly for our argument here, however, is the ways in which images of "tarento" are adopted in the consumption world. Looking at the consumer behavior and its link to culture, de Mooij (2003: 103) underlines the distinctive characteristic of "tarento" and recognizes that, in Japan, "advertising is a stage for established celebrities to capitalize on their fame (....) [t]he function of using such tarento is to give the brand 'face' in the world of brands with similar product attributes".

These "brand faces" are, indeed, none other than the members of the televisual family that we often meet in "THE Waido". It is certainly "their" (the nation-wide audiences') *Wideshow*, in which all the main components (including the regular guests and "tarento" that appear, technical features used, news broadcast, and ads displayed), are crafted and transmitted in a conscious response to the latest results of rating graphics and audience research. In commercial television, ratings are not only crucial technical criteria in measuring the programs' success (or failure), instead, as Mosco (1996: 151) rightfully argues, "are cybernetic commodities because they are constituted as commodities in the process of contributing to commodity production".

As a direct result of long-term trial-and-error processes, we observed the informative elements of the programs have gradually been replaced by more entertaining, intimacy-seeking contents. The broadcast time devoted to the commercial information has drastically increased, more news about the entertainment world, scandals, and sensational stories is provided. The result is news-"like" (called, *nyûsuppoi*) content, which is recodified with commercial elements, which is "infotained" and intensely commodified.

Towards the Infotainment Society?

Obviously, the growth of "infotainment" and its link to the phenomenon of commodification is not limited to Japan. This issue has been theoretically and empirically explored at great length during the last decades. Many scholars have observed this tendency in different media environments, linking the phenomenon to the direct influence of neo-liberal policies on the media market. Kellner (2003: 11) arrived at similar, but broader, conclusions:

> *Today the society and culture of spectacle is creating a new type of information and entertainment society, or what might be called the "infotainment society"... Currently, we are entering a new form of "technocapitalism" marked by a synthesis of capital and technology, and the information and entertainment industries, all of which is producing an "infotainment society" and spectacle culture.*

If what Kellner recognizes is true, then I would argue that Japan is certainly one of the most developed examples of this process toward an "infotainment society." Televised communication, though central, is not the only mechanism, functioning between consumption and "infotainment": with magazines, game centers, the cinema, pachinko, sports, pop-music, electronic games, "cybernetic" commodities, advertisement, manga, and other products of popular culture, the gigantic body of the Japanese "infotainment" industry wholeheartedly embraces "technocapitalism" in such a way that it offers an encompassing and stratified (class, age, gender) locus for different worlds of consumption.

Although this paper focused on two *Wideshows* at a local and national level, at root it interprets the complex ways in which one dominant contemporary form of televisual communication works via commodified content in an advanced capitalist society. This is crucial, I would argue, for numerous reasons. For one, it is no longer possible to draw a broad map of society without considering the most popular ways of information transmission, and the ways

these connect to commercialization. If the object of analysis is Japan, a country "saturated with consumption as the primary way of life, the altar on which almost all other energies, preoccupations, and social functions are sacrificed", (Clammer 2000: 210) this imperative is even greater.

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