

# Public service broadcasting in Nepal in the changing scenario

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1998

Acharya, M. P. (1998). Public service broadcasting in Nepal in the changing scenario. In Report of the Deutsche Welle-AMIC Workshop on Management of Change for Broadcasters : April 27 to May 2, 1998. Singapore: Asian Media Information and Communication Centre.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/86744>

Paper No. 14

**Subject: Re : Mr.Sankaran Ramanathan**

**Date: Sun, 12 Apr 1998 11:56:15**

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**Public Service Broadcasting in Nepal in the Changing Scenario**

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#### **1. Introduction:**

Broadcasting started in Nepal as a product of change. Way back in 1951, the political parties which were struggling to overthrow the then family rule of the Ranas, had recognised the potential of this medium and utilised it for the political change they sought. After the autocratic Rana regime was abandoned and democracy declared, the same group of people working for the then revolutionaries started using radio for changing the lifestyle of the illiterate poor masses of Nepal. Since then, many changes have taken place at Radio Nepal (RNE). Many more changes, of much larger consequential implications have taken place in the broadcast industry, especially during this last decade. This paper attempts to examine how well this organization has adapted itself to changes in the past and how it can prepare to change itself in the changing scenario.

#### **2. Historical Development:**

The only broadcasting organization in the country till 1985, Radio Nepal(RNE) became one of the two electronic media with the establishment of Nepal Television(NTV). Around the same time, there came a change in the organisational structure of RNE; in August 1984 it was converted into a self- sustaining board, from its earlier status of a government - funded department. With the restoration of democracy in 1990, RNE initiated many changes in its program and news content and such changes are continuing to date.

In 1992, HMG came up with the National Communications Policy. For the first time, this document paved the way for FM Radio station to be set up in the private sector. In 1993, the government enacted the National Broadcast Act which made the necessary legal provisions for licensing of private radio stations. To ensure further autonomy to RNE and NTV, changes in the structure of these organizations are envisaged.

##### **2.1 Policy Changes After 1990**

###### **2.1.1. National Communications Policy**

After the political change of 1990, intellectuals started questioning many of the then existing practices in the communications sectors. One prominent issue was the need and justification of the state-owned mass media in a democratic society. At the same time the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal (1990) had assured the people of their right to information. The document also recognized the various languages of the country as National Languages.

After prolonged consultations and deliberations, HMG Nepal came up with the National Communications Policy, 1992, replacing the earlier, and by then already obsolete National Communications Policy and Program 1988. Various

provisions of the 1992 policy as regards radio broadcasting are:

- Need to have a separate act relating to broadcasting
- Broadcasting station to have broadcasts on various languages in a gradual manner
- Possibility of airing foreign broadcasts on fixed criteria and procedure
- Corporate bodies from the private sector to obtain permission to start FM broadcasting
- RNE to broadcast on two channels
- RNE to develop its own system of news gathering
- RNE to set up more medium wave stations to ensure clear reception throughout the kingdom

#### 2.1.2 National Broadcasting Act, 1993

For the first time in the history of Nepal, the broadcasting sector was regulated by an act on broadcasting. This act empowered the government to make policies for operation of the broadcasting stations in the country and to supervise the material broadcast. It also made it possible for HMG to award licenses to private broadcasters wishing to broadcast educational, entertaining and news related programs using FM transmission system.

While producing programs for transmission, the act also asks the broadcasting organization to give priority to different areas, some of which are :

- Development programs in Agriculture, Education, Industry, Commerce, Science & Technology, Health, Family Planning, Forestry and Environmental protection
- Programs that enhance mutual understanding and foster harmony between the different tribes, languages, regions and religions
- Programs that help raise the economic standard of the country
- Programs that help to raise awareness of the people and help to cultivate among the people democratic values, norms and culture.

#### 2.2 RADIO NEPAL

To date, RNE is the only major radio broadcasting organization in the country. Hence, it may be worthwhile to have a brief look at where RNE stands today in terms of its estimated coverage, the time allocated to different kinds of programs and RNE's financial standing. Where relevant, certain comparisons will be made between where it is now and where it was few years back.

##### 2.2.1 Coverage Area

RNE broadcasts on medium wave (MW) and on short wave (SW). It is estimated that around ninety percent of the population have access to its MW signals. SW transmissions are expected to be heard throughout the kingdom, although with the inherent shortcomings of SW reception. RNE hopes to set up some more MW low power stations to cover various population areas. It also has plans to establish facilities to be able to broadcast two programmes simultaneously. The FM service for Kathmandu valley was started about 3 years back.

##### 2.2.2 Program Content

For quite sometime now, RNE has been broadcasting programs that could be broadly categorized as informative programs, educational programs and entertaining programs. In spite of the change in its structure to a self-sustaining broad, RNE has been providing a considerable part of its broadcast duration for educational programmes. Such programmes,



mainly produced by the different governmental and non governmental agencies, aim towards spreading knowledge on matters of health & sanitation, modern techniques on agricultural production, family planning, afforestation and the like. At different times in the past, the transmission duration has been increased and thus the percentage of time allocated to one category or the other has changed.

The chart below shows the times allocated to these three types of programs, at different periods of time.

Table 1.

Type of programs	Dec.1989 weekly Br. Hours. 101hrs.	June 1993 weekly Br. Hours. 107hrs. + 2hrs.*	June 1997 weeklyBr. Hours. 150hrs.** + 2hrs.
Informative Programs	16.8%	17.28%	20.50%
Educational Programs	38.7%	23.91%	16.40%
Entertaining Programs	44.5%	58.81%	63.10%

\* There is an additional 2 hour broadcast on each predetermined government holiday. Its content is mainly entertainment together with half an hour of songs in different national languages.

\*\* Includes 2hrs. of regional broadcast from each of the 5 regional stations.

Included in the educational category and not shown separately are various public service announcements of short duration on issues of national importance. Broadcast in the peak listening times, these include educational messages on conservation of forests on the need to keep the environment healthy and clean, precautions against fire (seasonal), messages on health, etc.

### 2.2.3 Financial Standing

After being converted into a self-sustaining board. RNE has gradually been working toward increasing its earning. There is a tendency to allocate more and more of the increased hours to entertainment to attract more advertisements and sponsorship (Table 1)

The chart below shows the total revenue of RNE at different times.

Table 2

	F.y 1983/84 (000 Rs)	F.Y 1996/97 Estimate (000 Rs)
Revenue from Commercials	5,500	39,584
Revenue from Educational Programs	500	13,174
Misc.Revenue	152	12,136
Grant from HMG	--	22,000
Contribution of Grant to total	--	25.31%

### 3. Changes in the Broadcast Scenario

With the introduction of the National Broadcast Act, in consonance with the changing mood worldwide, various changes have taken place in the broadcast service in Nepal. The FM service for Kathmandu, although set up by Radio Nepal, is being run totally by different private operators. A private radio station, Sagarmatha FM has started non commercial FM broadcasting for Kathmandu valley. Three

other licences for operating FM service for Kathmandu have been awarded. The Kathmandu Municipality is expected to start its services in a non commercial manner whereas the other two licencees will soon be starting commercial service for the same audience. The national Public Service Broadcaster, Radio Nepal looks ahead for tough competition in terms of expanding its service from its commercial services.

All previous efforts in the expansion of the production and transmission capability of Radio Nepal have been supported by the Government of Nepal and various donor countries, the UK and Japan in particular. The last such project in its expansion was in the year 1990.

It is noteworthy that about the same time, the government initiated steps towards privatization in the broadcast industry. By then, there had already emerged various television stations utilising the unlimited possibilities offered by the satellite industry. The audience will soon have access not only to various entertaining local radio channels but also to the ever expanding entertaining TV channels. How is the national broadcaster, devoid of the much needed revenue, to go about it ? While on the one hand it is not able to provide signals of adequate quality to all of its listeners nationwide, it is in dire need of replacing its already outdated transmission equipment on the other. The strides taken in the international arena in the application of digital equipment in the programme production field will soon make the present equipment unsuitable and replacements unavailable in the market.

This decade has rightly been described as the period which brought about a revolution in the communications industry. As a consequence, in the field of broadcasting, various new innovations have been successfully applied to improve the quality and reach of the broadcasts. Successful implementation of the satellite technology for direct reception of Television signals has not only seen the emergence of numerous private broadcasters in the region but has also outmoded the traditional concept of domestic and international broadcasting.

Preparedness or Otherwise ?

How well prepared is a small station like Radio Nepal in this fast changing scenario ? Far from being prepared, most of the time we are more than overwhelmed with the new technological development.

At a time when the energy costs are ever increasing we are still operating valve transmitting equipment manufactured in the fifties and the sixties and these are much power inefficient and constantly require the replacement of costly spares.

Even so, are we just watching these developments ? It may not be entirely true to say so. We have started incorporating some of the new technologies, although on a very small scale.

While establishing the FM Kathmandu service, we used solid state modular transmitter, also doing away with the conventional way of provision of passive standby transmitter. The Studio to Transmitter link for this service is a piece of digital equipment. For this service, we have started using digital audio recording equipment using floppy discs. For recording of music, we have acquired the state of the art 24 track digital recording equipment. For sometime now, we have been using a computerized recording unit with Digital Audio Tapes (DAT) for the logging of our daily broadcasts. We have plans to



computerize our Newsroom so that filing in our news bulletins could be better organized and more efficient. We also have acquired a few sets of DAWS, initially to familiarize our technical personnel and the programme producers in its application. Radio Nepal has started providing its news services through the INTERNET and this has been found to be quite popular. Use of minidisks has been initiated, although on a very small scale, with the intention of replacing the present cartridge tapes.

Once His Majesty's Government issues licences to private operators for starting paging services, we have plans to offer our transmitting equipment for starting RDS Paging Services for Kathmandu valley.

#### Conclusion

Various emerging technologies are transforming our identities, life styles, relationships, priorities, institutions, systems and societies in ways that we still only vaguely understand. They have the ability to manipulate our consciousness and our understanding of ourselves and the realities in which we live.

With the Universal trends towards open economy and privatization, broadcasting in the country is undergoing changes and its long term consequence are yet to be seen and felt. But the question is, has the traditional concept of Public Service Broadcasting become irrelevant? Have the general populace of countries like Nepal become so informed and educated that there is no more need to air educational programmes?

These and others, are some of the pertinent questions that arise in the context of the changes in the broadcasting domain today. The survival of small broadcasters broadly rests on the availability of funds for the acquisition of new equipment to gradually replace outdated equipment, support from charitable institutions and flexible policies to cope with the rising competition. At this juncture, small stations like Radio Nepal can only wait and watch with an open mind to adapt itself to the changes.