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**BALANCING BUSINESS AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY GOALS IN
BROADCASTING**

Social responsibility in broadcasting is highly concerned subject in many countries. TV and radio are becoming a lucrative industry for investors and function across the borders. Number of opinions on social responsibility of the broadcaster depending on how do you define public broadcasting. There is no universally accepted common definition for Public Broadcasting because of the diversity of the audience. Public Broadcasting needs to be defined in a very broad framework taking into consideration of ethnic, cultural, religious, linguistic, urban-rural and even age and gender difference in the society.

What is PBS? Broadcasters either fully or partly funded by the Government have the responsibility for public broadcasting. Further it is argued that Tax on home TV sets is the cost, the viewers pay for the Public Broadcasting. A considerable number of TV set owners do not pay TV tax and the other factor is the increasing operational cost of tax collection. Besides all these the tax revenue is only a very small percentage of the total budget requirements of the public broadcaster.

Simple definition is "flow of information provided by the broadcaster to cater to the social needs". Public Service Broadcasting systems which should cater to the public interest and none other. They are not motivated by profits. They are basically non-profit organizations.

From the viewer's point, what they are interested is quality programmes transmitted to their home TV sets. Viewers do not concern the cost of the transmission.

The current vision on PBS is changing. Today PBS cannot depend only on government funding. It needs various sources of funding. However, today many governments strongly believe that Public Broadcasting cannot be funded only by the state.

The state funded broadcasters used to accommodate non-commercial programmes due to political and social obligations. As the funding is guaranteed state broadcasters are generous to provide more airtime for various non-commercial programmes. As a result free airtime allocation and guaranteed income, interest of producing high quality programmes was declined. But this approach is not realistic today.

How do you draw a line to distinguish between Public Broadcasting and commercial broadcasting?

Will it correct to label all programmes, which bring revenue to the station, as commercial broadcasting? The question is balance between two objectives; 'to inform people' and 'to make money'. This is a common challenge for PBS today. How do you survive as a broadcaster?

Most important factor is that the opportunity costs of transmitting less revenue programmes against high revenue programmes in order to meet the requirements of some sectors of the society. For example, accommodating religious programmes in the transmission obviously curtails the opportunity to earn revenue because those programmes should be purely non-commercial. How far a station could accommodate such non-commercial programmes for the sake of social responsibility.

The practical approach is to maintain manageable ratio between PBS and Commercial programmes. This ratio is certainly based on how each broadcaster defines PBS.

There are few important factors, which could address this objective.

- What is the annual budgetary commitment/programme expenditure for PBS.

- How much airtime could allocate for PBS.

- How many programmes regularly could give for PBS in terms of programme schedule time slots.

- How far PBS programmes could be allocated appropriate time slots in terms of "giving better time slots for respective target groups".

No doubt that private stations cannot allocate more airtime for PBS as they highly concern on rate of return on the investment. Commercial Broadcasters naturally work on profit maximization. Therefore their programmes are largely based on popular culture. Audience rating is most concern factor for commercial broadcasters to attract commercial value, which adds to the revenue. Commercial TV stations mainly operate their programmes based on audience; revenue and profit margin; advertiser; and the regulatory authority.

It is important for even the Government owned broadcasters to generate revenue through their programmes. Quality programmes on PBS could achieve reasonable audience ratings, which could create commercial value for the respective time belts. This situation could generate revenue through so-called "spots" sales of freestanding and also cooperate support announcements. Commercial revenue could be generated outside the programmes maintaining the democracy of airing public service programmes without any commercial interference.

Maximization of revenue on special programmes, which have high potential to generate income, as well as profits.

Let us focus our discussion to Sri Lankan situation especially the experience of the National TV.

Maintaining the ratio of 55% PBS and 45% fully commercial programmes from the total transmission hours, operating 2 channels, staffing 825 employees, operating seven transmitter stations to cover 90% of the population, without any funds from the Government and paying all corporate taxes to the Government. Keeping well over 45% of the audience share and over 35% TV advertising market share. This is one situation of balancing PBS and business.

It is a highly challenging situation as seven more commercial TV broadcasters and two Pay TV operators are competing severely in the TV industry in Sri Lanka.

At the same time there is no proper legal framework to address the necessity of PBS. Now the policy makers are working on setting up a regulatory authority for electronic media. On the other hand Sri Lankan media both private and state enjoy media freedom to a greater extent. Therefore each broadcaster has its own definition on PBS.

A very good example is while National TV (Rupavahini) allocates free airtime to educate the public on health issues related to tobacco and alcohol; the private stations enjoy high revenue on tobacco and alcohol promotional activities.

In the Sri Lankan situation PBS is more concerned with educational programmes both formal and non-formal. Today the national TV allocates two hours daily for formal education programmes designed on school curricula. More than 50 hours of programmes per week are on non-formal

education. Further, two hours of programmes including live one-hour programme on prime time per week are focused on IT related educational programmes, which are relatively costly than other educational programmes.

Today the challenge for PBS is to enhance freedom by providing broader choice, more access, and more interaction and high quality for general public than commercial programmes permit. Technology has taken the leading role providing more options with more choice and easy access. Simply the remote controller of a home TV set has become a strong weapon. It influences the viewer to search attractive programmes. 'Audience' is the objective to be achieved for both state broadcaster as well as for commercial broadcaster. There have been criticism on 'the audience' concept. Critics are with the idea of cultural responsibility and social accountability and define the audience as the public. The public must be well informed, educated and reformed. But the question is who decides the agenda for PBS. 'We give you - you take it' ideology is no more existing. Viewers have the democratic rights to decide what they want. Today with the expansion of user friendly technologies, more access modes are offered to the public. But this scenario should not push the public broadcaster to lose his grounds and neglect the need of catering to small segments of the society. Viewers of a TV set placed in community center in the remote village with less consuming power more important than the viewers in the affluence society. Public broadcaster has more responsibility of catering to the non-consuming class.

Can we generate revenue from public service broadcasting? Lets us focus on some of the new revenue sources for PBS.

- Value added services such as websites providing more information and text on subscription.
- Selling of informative video cassettes.
- Licensing for publications on special programmes such as educational programmes.
- Online study guides.

The traditional argument, which is still on the table, is that the Public Broadcasting should be funded either by the state or N.G.O. with out any commercial tag. The other supporting argument on this nature is that tax on home TV sets is to be increased as the prime funding source for PBS.

To serve the public it is necessary to ensure level playing field for both state and private sector broadcasters with adequate regulations. Public service broadcasting responsibilities should be reserved, to serve the needs unmet by market competition. When the TV license are issued it is necessary to impose regulations on PBS.

What should be done in order to meet the challenges?

1. Ensure providing high quality programmes to keep the audience as well as public support.
2. Promote cooperation between other broadcasters across the borders to share programmes, which could minimize the production cost.

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