

Socio-economic impact of broadcast satellite in the Asia-Pacific : a Singapore perspective

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A Singapore Perspective**

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**SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT
OF
BROADCAST SATELLITE IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC:
A SINGAPORE VIEWPOINT**

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SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF BROADCAST SATELLITES IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC: A SINGAPORE VIEWPOINT

INTRODUCTION

The world has indeed become a "global village" because of the rapid development in mass communications. Through satellite and direct broadcasting transmissions, events can be seen instantaneously and by millions of viewers around the world. Cutting across national boundaries, broadcasting by satellites has also widened the scope and content of the TV viewer's diet. TV without Frontiers is definitely in the air.

OVERVIEW OF DEVELOPMENTS

From Germany to Japan and Scandinavia to the UK, extra television channels relayed from space direct to the home are proliferating. In the US where, until now, additional choice has mainly come from cable television networks fed by low-power satellites, ambitious plans are being unveiled to broadcast more than 100 channels direct to the home, using small flat aerials the size of dinner napkin. In early 1989, Europe woke up to 16 channels of extra choice from the ASTRA satellite. By the end of this year, there will be more than 50 satellite television services over Europe alone.

Nearer home, satellite broadcasting is also a reality. Japan's NHK broadcast via satellite and these signals are received in Korea as well as parts of Taiwan. In Southeast Asia, TV broadcasts using Palapa can be received with a large antennae dish. There are also plans by Asiasat I to set up a regional satellite television network, beaming down on countries stretching from Japan to India.

Through satellite dishes, people can enjoy foreign programmes from other countries. The choice of viewing is no longer limited to the fare offered by national public service broadcasts. There is little doubt that a growing TV menu offered by satellite TV will be welcomed by the individual as it means greater diversity and choice of programmes. The race is already on in Europe to persuade viewers to pay for even-wider multi-channel satellite channels.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

All this is very good business, especially for those providing the satellite broadcasting facilities. The new technology has, however, important political, cultural, and economic implications.

For these reasons, it is necessary to consider broadcasting by satellite not only within the context of more broadcasting entertainment provided by satellite channels beamed direct to individual homes but also within the context of national states planning for their socio-economic needs.

Each nation state will experience the changes in a different way. While some nations will perceive the new media as a threat to their socio-economic development and to their existing structures of broadcasting, others are likely to welcome the additional channels of entertainment, the diversity in telecommunications delivery systems and the new era in broadcasting competition.

At the same time, however, there will be concerns about how the new media will change the face of TV broadcasting because satellite broadcasting cuts across national borders. The impact of foreign satellite channels will be greatest for those nations which strongly desire to encourage their own culture.

The decision as to whether a country should open up its air waves is not an easy one. In question are a number of policy issues, such as:

- Should there be unlimited access to foreign satellite TV programmes?
- Should the content of TV satellite services be regulated?
- How should national rules on advertising and foreign content be adhered?
- How should a nation deal with unwanted satellite signals spilling over into its territory?

The response to these questions would have to take the following factors into consideration.

1) CULTURAL SOVEREIGNTY

TV is a vital cultural and social force. Cutting across national boundaries, there is no doubt that satellite broadcasting will impinge on cultural sovereignty. Foreign invasion of national airwaves with its daily deluge of foreign programmes pose a real challenge to locally made and produced programmes and TV channels.

An Americanization of outlook is one main concern as the United States has dominated international syndication of TV programmes for years. Even in Western Europe, there is a heated debate on the question of quotas on American television programmes.

For us in Asia, where satellite broadcasting has had a shorter history and where TV programme imports tend to outnumber home-grown productions in some countries, the concern over the cultural impact of foreign programmes is even more acute. The factor that the new satellite broadcasting system will mean an overly strong cultural influence by foreign countries is something that has to be taken into account.

In addressing the above issue, the concern should, however, not be merely one of averting the imposition of non-Asian values but in discovering what "Asian-ness" means to us. If we are to come to an understanding of Asian identity, then television and radio must contribute to the greater awareness and appreciation of one another amongst the peoples of Asia. Satellite broadcasting should be used as a cultural and educational tool rather than simply as another source of television entertainment.

2) INTERNATIONAL NEWS FLOW

The broadcast media is a powerful tool for influencing public opinion. Public opinion is shaped not only by the way the editors and journalists comment on current issues but also by the selection of headlines, pictures and features and the manner of their presentation.

The direct transmission of coverage of events may become a sensitive issue because of differing national attitudes and perceptions of the role of the media and different national interests.

For instance, in 1987, the British Government waged a legal battle to halt publication abroad of *Spycatcher*, the memoirs of Mr Peter Wright, a former British M15 agent. This book was perceived to be damaging to the national interests and mention of the allegations made by Mr Wright were prohibited from the domestic news media. There could not be such restriction though on foreign news transmitting directly to the British households. It remains to be seen what means could be taken when foreign news coverage conflicts with domestic national interests.

3) **SATELLITE BROADCASTING AS A COMMERCIAL VENTURE**

The construction of technologically advanced cable systems, the development and launch of technologically advanced satellite systems, the provision of programmes and other services for these news developments require enormous financial outlay. Few governments are able to develop them with public funds. Most countries would have to depend on private funding for these projects.

In the present climate of economic liberalization, and privatisation, the tendency is for the new media - cable TV, satellite broadcasting and DBS - to become dependent on these forms of funding, notably advertising, sponsorship or subscription which place them firmly in the market place.

As commercial enterprises then, countries which treat television broadcasting as a vital cultural and social force within their territories are confronted and threatened by services which are motivated by an overriding concern with entertainment and profit.

Competition among stations may lead them to imitate the American mass appeal approach, with the consequent

lowering of standards as programming judgements were subordinated to the test of audience size alone. Non-profitable programmes, like the minority language programmes, programmes such as current affairs, information/educational and cultural/fine arts programmes, would seldom, if at all, be broadcast by the stations. Will all these suggest a lowest common denominator satellite service?

A possible alternative to excessive reliance on private funding by large media conglomerates will be for a few neighbouring countries to share a satellite to launch regional broadcast services.

A regional broadcast service will enable the participating countries who share common concerns to compete more effectively against foreign satellite broadcasts and reduce the potential loss of the region's viewers to foreign stations. Participating countries would also have the benefit of a wider variety of programmes for their populations, economies of scale arising from co-productions, encouragement of home-grown talents, technology transfer and greater incentive for foreign investment in related industries. But, such a regional service have to satisfy wide cultural and language differences of the individual states.

4) REGULATION OF SATELLITE BROADCASTING COVERAGE AND CONTENT

There are few internationally binding legal instruments to regulate satellite broadcasting - mainly guidelines for the treatment of issues, such as copyright, signals overspill into neighbouring countries, and advertising. In 1977, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) formulated a plan on the use of DBS which laid down the use of DBS for broadcasting directly to viewers within national boundaries.

In December 1982, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution governing the use of DBS for international direct broadcasting. It requires a state intending to establish an international DBS service to consult any state which would receive transmissions from the international DBS. The service could be established only after such consultations.

On the whole, however, national laws continue to form the strongest basis for legislation in the field of censorship, rules on advertising and foreign content.

For instance, the reception of what a nation considers pornography may be regarded by another as merely a vehicle for advertising.

In general, then, there is a whole set of interests that have to be considered prior to the introduction of satellite TV channels to the domestic audiences. Alongside, greater competition and diversity and choice of TV programmes for audiences, there are also concerns about the long-term impact of foreign invasion of national airwaves.

SINGAPORE'S PERSPECTIVE

In the case of Singapore, broadcasting has long been seen as a "public service" which must serve the "public good", in terms of requirements not to offend public decency and taste, avoid political bias and provide a range of programmes for different sectors of society.

Against this backdrop, Singapore has yet to allow the installation of satellite dishes because such equipment would provide unlimited access to foreign TV programmes. There is a wide range of foreign TV programmes, some of which purvey

values and lifestyles which are unacceptable to the majority of our people. As we are a multi-racial and multi-religious society, we must also be careful of programmes which may be offensive on racial or religious grounds.

We do recognise, however, that satellite TV programmes will provide a greater variety of entertainment. Viewers will also have an increased choice of specialised and general interest services. With greater competition for TV viewers to pay for ever-wider, multi-channel choices, there would also be higher quality productions. We are also aware that with rapid technological development, censorship and enforcement will become increasingly difficult. This is more so when satellite dishes get smaller and smaller and become affordable to most people.

In the next ten years, it is likely that television programmes transmitted by satellites can be received in the region by small antennae dishes measuring less than half-a-metre in diameter.

We are presently studying the experiences of other countries to see how best to enable Singaporeans to enjoy a wider variety of programmes while minimizing the long-term

negative effects of prolonged exposure to undesirable values and lifestyles.

The central issue will be how to integrate the new technology with our national needs and aspirations.