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MULTI – CHANNEL TELEVISION : POVERTY AMIDST PLENTY?

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Introduction

The decade of the nineties has seen an unprecedented proliferation of television channels. Satellite broadcasting has delivered tens of channels – sometimes a couple of hundred – to viewers practically all across the globe. This manna from heaven has thrown open new possibilities and raised many issues; not the least of which is the doubt about whether what we receive is truly “manna”.

Four major factors have contributed to the phenomenal growth of multi-channel television: the rapid advances in satellite broadcasting and related on-ground technologies; the consequent cost-reductions; the entrepreneurial drive that has led to the amazingly rapid growth of cable TV infrastructure; and the compelling attraction of interesting/entertaining programming.

Ideally, cable TV is not about more channels; it is about wider choice, better programmes, and fulfilment of specific/narrow needs. To what extent has this happened? Do different TV channels today present genuine alternatives? Do they meet the needs of cultural, linguistic, thematic, socio-economic and other minorities? Do they provide quality, mental stimulation and perspective? This paper seeks to examine these and other related issues, more specifically in the Indian context, and makes some suggestions for policy initiatives.

Growth of C & S TV

As in many other areas, in the case of multi-channel TV too, supply created demand. This led on to a positive feedback loop with supply creating demand, resulting in greater supply and so on. While technology was obviously a necessary condition, it was not by itself sufficient to trigger the revolutionary growth that we have witnessed. This is further borne out by the fact that the major elements of the technology now being used – large, high-power satellites, with many transponders, and the satellite reception and cable technology on the ground – have been

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available for many years. While new techniques (especially digital compression) have been evolving and have made vastly increased capacities possible, these too are not completely new and their major impact is in the field of direct-to-home (DTH) broadcasts rather than in the area of cable-distributed channels.

Technology, while necessary, was not by itself sufficient to create the multi-channel revolution. The primary driving force for this has been **software**. It is the programmes – their content (or, sometimes, lack of it), the forms and formats, the presentation-style (and, often, the presenter), the gloss and finish – that have fed the ever growing demand for TV channels.

In India, multi-channel TV began in 1991 with the exceptional “live” coverage of the Gulf War by CNN. Satellite-reception antennae (some as large as 6m in diameter) slowly sprouted around the country. Small cable systems – used until then mainly to distribute movies (generally pirated versions) to a small number of households – grew, and some set up a facilities to receive and distribute the CNN signal. However, after a while, as the war ended and the novelty of “live”, non-governmental news wore off, there was little interest in the very American-orientated channel. The explosive growth of cable and satellite (C & S) TV or multi-channel TV was triggered by the availability of a wider range of programming: from STAR and, more importantly, Zee. The latter, despite its rather shoddy quality, provided an alternative to the staid, government-run channel (Doordarshan). Above all, it was indigenous programming and in Hindi. While STAR hogged much of the headlines (with battle-cries of “foreign invasion” and “cultural imperialism” being echoed in seminar after seminar and article after article), Zee not only got vast chunks of the C & S viewership, but drove the expansion of cable. As other channels came in from abroad, C & S grew further, with sports channels being another major catalyst for expansion. The steady “Indianization” (in content and/or language) of most of the foreign channels gave a further boost to growth. Meanwhile, the start-up of private regional language channels increased the depth of penetration, especially in South India. Sun TV was a pioneer in this, and has won a large audience for its Tamil-language programming not only in Tamil Nadu, but in other States too. Similarly, Eenadu helped to create tremendous penetration of C & S, even in the rural areas of Andhra Pradesh.

Meanwhile, the popularity of the cable networks “own” movie channels (generally a low-quality VHS tape, often pirated) continued but was threatened by increasingly stringent enforcement of copyright laws. As a result, a more organised, “corporatised” form of movie-delivery took shape -- e.g., CVO, a channel that is distributed through cable systems on the basis of tape delivery and not via satellite. The movie content on other channels too has increased, even as more primarily-

movie channels (Zee Cinema, STAR Movies etc.) came into existence. The availability of movies on TV has been another major growth hormone for C&S.

As a result, in less than 10 year, C&S households have increased from a few thousand to over 20 million. It is now fairly common to have 30 or 40 channels available via cable, even though many TV sets (the old monochrome ones) can receive only about 10 channels. Most colour TV sets too receive only 16 channels. It is only "cable-ready" sets that are capable of receiving all the channels. While their number is growing rapidly – aided by trade-in offers and big discounts – they are yet only a small fraction of the total TV sets. This makes the band of carriage (by the cable system) an important determinant of what is viewed, and which channels are successful. It also limits the viewer's range of choice.

Quality and True Choice

What is the extent of true choice that a typical viewer has within the constraints of what s/he can actually receive on his/her TV set? In one sense, each programme and each channel is a "choice", just as different brands of soft drinks (e.g., Coke or Pepsi) offer a choice. However, it can be argued that **true choice** means having **different** alternatives and not merely clones. Thus, choice must extend beyond merely different brand names. On TV, watching sports instead of a sitcom, or a documentary instead of a music video, represents true choice. Watching clones of a sitcom - even with different actors - is not true choice. In the Indian scenario, one of the clear trends has been a cloning of successful shows. Initially, many indigenous programmes (whether aired on Doordarshan or one of the private Indian-language channels) were clones of Western programming, reflecting situations, problems and interactions that are common in the West, but rare in India. Basically, the broad themes were the same, with Indian actors replacing the foreign ones and English being substituted by Hindi. Of late, the growing popularity of certain programmes has led to a cloning of indigenous programmes by other indigenous programmes. This short-cut "copy-cat" route to success has gone to the extent that the same film is sometimes aired on different channels. Of course, a large number of channels have the almost-mandatory countdown or Top Ten shows. Since there is little by way of **content** in all these shows, there is no question of differing perspectives or opinions, as could happen in different (more serious) programmes.

While the growth of channels has led to some very positive alternatives, competitive pressures and a "lowest common denominator" approach by the cable networks has resulted in the carriage of "popular" or general entertainment channels in the prime band. Thus, those with monochrome/old TV sets often receive only those channels that are merely clones of each other.

As a result of these factors, true choice is limited. "So many channels and nothing to watch" is an often-heard refrain, reflecting the anguish of "water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink".

It is not that genuine choice is not available. Over the decade of C&S growth in India, new channels offering alternatives **have** been launched. They provide a diversity of language, content, theme, genre and perspective. There are separate, dedicated channels for sports, Hindi films, English films, news, factual programming, etc. Interestingly – and positively – in almost each category of programming, there are at least two channels, thus ensuring competition. Ideally, over time, this should catalyse better quality and more responsive or need-based programming. Upgradations in quality are already discernible: technical quality has improved vastly; presenters are more professional; editing and sound are far better; graphics and animation have improved. Exposure to a number of channels, including trans-national ones, has made the viewer more conscious of quality and – increasingly – of content. Programmes that are poorly produced and reflect low technical and aesthetic standards are unlikely to survive. Thus, it is correct to say that the growth of multi-channel/C&S TV has led to a distinct, overall improvement in **quality standards**, at least as far as technical and aesthetic standards are concerned. However, regarding the quality of **content**, it is difficult to claim much (or any) improvement.

In this situation, are there any mechanisms by which the viewer can be "protected", offered genuine choice, and better quality? There is certainly – and very obviously – a role here for a public service broadcaster. However, in addition, what steps or policy initiatives can be taken by the government?

One result of media proliferation is the fragmentation of the audience. With so many channels, some targeted at specific groups (segmented by age, class, language, interests etc.), the audience gets divided, with very a few programmes being able to draw a large proportion of the audience; most channels/programmes get only a small proportion of the audience. Thus, the audience is spread over a number of channels, with the gap between the smallest and largest steadily declining. As a result, even small (audience) channels have been able to attract some advertising

revenue. However, the experience in India has reinforced that from elsewhere in the world: to survive, channels need two sources of revenue – on-air advertising, and "subscriber" fees. The latter reduces greatly the dependence on purely commercial factors. It is particularly good for channels that people want (and are therefore willing to pay) but do not consume (view) too much. At the other extreme are some of the movie channels : in this case, the consumption (by viewers) is high but the propensity to pay is low.

Soon, DTH will become operational in India, and may bring – as it has in UK – over 200 channels. Digital audio broadcasting via satellite is expected to start soon, again providing a vast number of channels. Thus, quantitative growth is certain and inevitable.

Policy Suggestions

In this situation, it is important to sustain and encourage programmes of high quality and/or programmes of interest to minority audiences. This needs a policy framework that promotes this goal. Some of the critical policies that would do so include the following :

1. Create an environment that ensures the emergence and growth of a "pay" scenario for cable channels, in which C & S households pay a fee for "pay" channels that they wish to subscribe to (and only for those).

This is not only has the advantage of viewers paying only for what they want, but it will also promote better quality. This is because viewers will, almost always, be willing to pay for "good" channels even though their "consumption" (viewing time) of these may be far lower than that of "lowest common denominator", empty (of content), or escapist channels. It is rather like the willingness to pay for a dictionary or encyclopaedia, even though it may not be read or referred to as frequently as pulp fiction.

The subscription revenue gives the channel an additional degree of freedom vis-à-vis the commercial compulsions of advertising revenue. This, again, helps to maintain/improve the quality of programming.

The full benefits of this, however, require "addressability", which does not exist in India today. This is basically a method by which the cable network can selectively provide or cut-

off the availability of any channel to each individual household. This is done through a “set-top box” in each households. While such a device is commonplace elsewhere, in India its deployment is constrained by the (relatively) high cost.

2. There is, therefore, need for policy steps to encourage the spread of set-top (“addressable”) boxes. This could be done by reductions in Customs duties on the components/sub-assemblies and on taxes, and low-interest financing. Once this is done, a virtuous cycle (lower prices leading to higher demand, resulting in greater production which make for economies of scale that, in turn, lend to a further fall in prices) would ensure the rapid spread of addressable boxes.
3. A related initiative could be to ensure greater added-value for the buyer of such “set-top boxes”. One possibility is to add more capability in the box (hopefully at small incremental cost) so that it can be used to access Internet. This upmarket version of the addressable box may find many buyers, given the growing popularity -- and importance -- of Internet.
4. Specify that every cable system must carry -- in its “prime band” (i.e., the channels that can be viewed even on an old monochrome set) -- at least one public-service channel, one educational channel, one news channel and one channel that is of interest to a minority (ethnic, linguistic, cultural) in the area. An independent authority should define which channels can be classified as “public service”, “educational” etc.
5. Tax incentives should be given to cable networks that carry more than one educational or cultural channel in the prime-band. This could be in the form of a reduction/exemption from entertainment tax (levied on cable TV by many States in India).
6. Provide strong support (including financial) to public-service TV channels. In the context of India (and many other countries), where the State is yet an active player in the broadcasting sector, this means providing adequate resources to the State-owned public-service channel(s). Equally important, they need autonomy, freedom and flexibility : all being necessary conditions for the promotion of quality, creativity and relevance.
7. Encourage the emergence of “alternative” channels, that provide a voice to the silent or voice-less. Voluntary agencies, NGOs, local community groups -- or even the private sector,

if it is interested – should be encouraged to set up such channels. This may require, in different situations, changes in the regulatory framework. Decentralisation of State-owned broadcasting is a possible first step that the government can itself take. Financial incentives to such channels may facilitate their emergence through the voluntary/NGO route. Clearly, this is more feasible for radio, given its far lower costs. However, the possibilities of stimulating the emergence of such channels on TV should also be explored.

8. Make it mandatory for DTH systems (and satellite audio broadcasting platforms) to provide, free of cost, at least two channels from amongst those selected/certified by an independent regulator as “quality” channels.

These steps – costing little or nothing to the government (except, possibly point 6 above) – will provide an excellent start to the dream of meaningful, high-quality TV.