

The radio and television perspective

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Asian Newspaper Publishers EXPO

THE RADIO AND TELEVISION PERSPECTIVE

speech by

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I feel particularly honoured, as a radio and television broadcaster, to have been invited to speak to an audience of newspaper publishers.

In the Britain of the 1920s, when the BBC was founded, the Newspaper Proprietors' Association were so concerned about the threat posed by the 'wireless' that severe restrictions were placed on the BBC to limit the amount of news it could carry. They were particularly concerned about the football and racing results!

Today we remain competitors but I think everyone is agreed there is room for us all. Indeed the boundaries between us are becoming increasingly blurred as broadcasting and publishing technology converge. And nowhere is the growth potential for both print and broadcast media greater than here in Asia.

I fear that to give a full radio and television perspective on Asia within 20 minutes would be beyond me. It would take an entire conference and someone much more knowledgeable than I am.

But I can give the BBC's perspective as an international media organisation with radio, tv and publishing interests.

Although the BBC is an international broadcaster, I would like to think we are an Asian broadcaster too. We have employed many talented Asian journalists since the 1940s. They have enriched us and I hope that those who have returned from the BBC to work in their own countries, whether in broadcast or print, have themselves been enriched by the experience. Asia also contains some of our biggest audiences. Our network of correspondents and stringers covers the continent - and unlike some other international broadcasters they are here week in and week out - not just flown in to cover a major story. That gives us the vital context to analyse news for our audiences in Asia and right around the world.

Partnerships with Asian broadcasters are crucial to the development of our services on radio and television. On radio we broadcast in a dozen Asian languages. In English, our programmes include the specially made regional programmes *East Asia Today* and *South Asia Report*. And association with local radio stations is an ever more central aspect of our operations in radio.

On television our 24-hour English language news and information channel BBC World is available on the southern beam of the Asiasat 1 satellite, on Wharf Cable in Hong Kong, and on satellite and cable in Japan in partnership with Nissho Iwai, with more than 40 hours a week dubbed into Japanese.

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I am very pleased that you can now subscribe to BBC World here on Singapore Cable Vision, whose service is initially available in the New Town. Singapore has always been of enormous importance to the BBC: not only because the BBC is available on radio 24 hours a day on FM but also because of the immense importance of our relay station here for millions of World Service listeners. It is therefore always a particular pleasure to be invited to attend a (media) conference in Singapore.

Looking at developments across Asia, at first glance the perspectives for radio and television are quite different.

With the advent of satellite technology, I think it is fair to say that television has already been effectively deregulated across much of the continent. There has been a dramatic expansion in choice for millions of viewers and terrestrial tv has been forced to compete with the satellite revolution by revitalising its programming in order to retain audiences.

The launch of Asiasat-2 (28.11.95) will further accelerate the process, with its single beam set to cover 70% of the world's population.

By contrast, and with some notable exceptions, the radio business in Asia has been stagnant and even declining. Yet the same satellite technology that lies behind the growth of choice in television could underpin a renaissance in the radio industry. Asiasat-2, for example, has a major part in the BBC's plans for radio across Asia as I will explain in a moment.

Continued emphasis on state control is what is hampering radio's development. In the Philippines there is a tradition of lively local stations, but in many other Asian countries there is a danger that radio audiences will be lost needlessly because of a failure to adapt quickly enough to competition, particularly from satellite television.

Already tv audiences have overtaken radio in some areas, even among many poor communities. Where new international television services have penetrated the market, radio as a medium is under threat if it cannot become more independent and appealing to its audiences. In these environments, it is no accident that international radio carries a banner for the radio medium.

The BBC's traditional shortwave radio audiences are highest in areas where domestic competition is restricted. In Burma, for example, we cannot put a figure on the numbers who tune into the BBC - but there is much anecdotal evidence. Opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi spoke on her release from house

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arrest of her reliance on international broadcasters including the BBC in English and Burmese.

In Pakistan research shows that more than one in four of the adult population listen to radio stations broadcasting from outside the country. The latest figures from Pakistan show increasing radio audiences for the BBC. We now have 16 million weekly listeners, up four million since 1993, some 22% of the adult population.

But the trend in India is different. Television audiences are showing steady growth and radio is declining, although there are the beginnings of local FM services, some private - and newspaper publishers can play a key role in leveraging independent journalism into the radio market.

Domestic radio has made real progress in some parts of Asia, however - for example in Thailand, where Prime Minister Anand initiated partial deregulation of broadcast media following the May Uprising in 1992.

Print media groups, which have displayed a higher degree of editorial freedom, have helped to introduce serious journalism into local radio programming in Thailand.

And the BBC has been able to make a contribution to the process. A number of university and commercial radio stations include BBC programmes in Thai in their schedules, and some also take our English programmes.

The changes mean that radio in Thailand is now of higher quality and despite the competition from tv and increasingly from cable too, it has become the medium with the highest growth rate in the country.

Where deregulation has taken place, the role of international radio inevitably changes and increasingly occupies a niche market. The BBC is well placed here to add value from its tradition of supplying global news and analysis.

Taking the most media-rich country in the world, for example - the United States - there is increasing demand from American public radio stations for BBC programmes and next year we are launching a new drive-time programme made specifically for the USA in partnership with the PRI (public radio) network and WGBH Boston. (Minister Yeo: Think globally; act locally.)

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Asiasat-2 will provide the BBC with the opportunity to provide an improved service to radio stations across Asia as the first stage in our new Global Distribution System.

We will be providing the full range of our programming in English and up to 12 other languages, in digital quality using this new distribution network.

Radio stations will be equipped with a new type of receiver which we have had custom-built. Using the latest digital technology, a stream of programmes tailored to each individual station's requirements will be scheduled remotely from the control room in London and downlinked via a small satellite dish.

This new system, which is due to be fully operational by next spring, will give us much greater flexibility in meeting the exact needs of individual stations, in high-quality stereo where required.

It will also improve distribution of programmes to our own relay stations and for new FM services such as the one we launched in Dhaka last year. Our agreement with the Bangladeshi Government enables our listeners in the Dhaka area to hear our programmes in Bengali and English on FM.

Digital technology is transforming every aspect of the broadcasting business from programme production to distribution. The BBC is working closely with other international broadcasters, radio services and satellite operators to develop Digital Audio Broadcasting by satellite. This could be the ultimate replacement for today's shortwave radio, providing digital quality signals directly from satellites to a new generation of radio sets.

But there is no doubt that existing shortwave technology will still be vital to reach mass audiences in Asia until well into the next century. That is why the BBC is going ahead with the construction of a major new relay station in Thailand. When fully operational in 1997 it will cover an area that is home to 40% of the world's population.

The BBC is keen to work with, not against the grain of the development of domestic media through partnerships with Asian media organisations, from small local radio stations to the biggest multimedia corporations. The BBC's aim is to contribute to programme quality and choice - not just in news and analysis but in a range of other programmes.

In education, for example. We have been developing our educational programming for radio. This year's projects have included special series in nine

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Asian languages on women and women's issues to tie in with the Beijing conference. Next January we are launching series providing basic information about sex and reproductive health in English and eight Asian languages.

Our English language teaching programmes are being specially tailored for the needs of Indian listeners with two radio series produced in India using Indian actors.

And we have set up a new commercial division, BBC Worldwide Learning, to develop the provision of educational products and services, including multi-media, in association with Britain's Open University. Projects are currently being discussed with partners around the world.

On television, the BBC does not itself broadcast to Asia, but works entirely with commercial broadcasting partners. This is how we launched what is now BBC World to Asian audiences as part of the Star TV network four years ago.

BBC World is an international news channel but - taking the same approach as we do on radio - it does not settle for the traditionally Western agenda of what represents news (in Asia). In addition to our own Asian specialists, we use local suppliers - for example in India, where ANI gather pictures for us. The weekday programme, *BBC Newshour Asia & Pacific*, for example, combines international news with tailored Asian programming for early evening audiences in India and late evening viewers in Tokyo and Hong Kong. BBC World also commissions *Indian Business Report* from an independent production company in Delhi.

As many of you will know, and as Minister Yeo mentioned this morning, STAR's change of ownership led to the decision to take BBC World off the northern beam of Asiasat but enabled us to continue on the southern beam until the end of March next year. It is of course a priority for us to restore BBC World to audiences right across Asia, and we are in discussions aimed at ensuring we achieve that objective (with STAR about our future relationship).

Of course Asian telecom companies are playing an important part in the development of new media technology such as Video on Demand. BBC Worldwide Television is currently involved in 10 trials around the world. Two are in Asia - the first has been run with Hong Kong Telecom and the second, with Singapore Telecom, is planned for the end of this year.

New technology is increasingly blurring the distinctions between television, radio and traditional publishing. There can be little doubt that fresh

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arrangements of sound, text and image using CD-ROM or online technology, will find a growing market and will increasingly supplement - but replace - the existing media in which we currently work.

The BBC has recently created a multimedia centre to encourage the development of new media skills by bringing together producers in radio and television, in news and current affairs. We have set up a multimedia division to develop new products, starting with CD-ROM and online.

Asia will undoubtedly be in the forefront of multimedia developments and this will be a fresh area for cooperation between Asian media groups and the BBC. Clearly the prospects are immensely exciting, whether for radio, television or multimedia.

I am certainly confident that, unlike the 1920s, when the BBC was accused of wanting to 'interfere with the sale of newspapers', that this spirit of cooperation and partnership will extend to many of the newspaper publishers represented at this conference!

One of the characteristics of an increasingly complex media environment is that those any of us regards as key competitors are the same time potential or actual collaborators. Collaboration and partnership will, in my view, be fundamental to the success of any ambitious media organisation in the future.

But for any organisation in media, important as new methods of delivery may be, a successful brand depends on the quality of what's being offered - and in increasingly saturated media markets a distinctive brand is likely to become even more important.