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1997

Leonard, H. (1997). Bridging the gap : foreign and local programming. In AMIC Annual Conference on Skyways, Highways and Corridors: Asia's Communication Challenges, Kuala Lumpur, June 19-21, 1997. Singapore: Asian Media Information and Communication Centre.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/93396>

Paper No. 17

Bridging the Gap

Foreign and local programming

a presentation by

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at the

6th Annual AMIC Conference

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

June 19, 1997



I thought I would begin by giving you a few brief words about my organisation, the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union — or the ABU. This is because I find that, although the broadcasters of the region know what the ABU is, those outside the business don't seem to know us well. Just so that you will know where I'm coming from.

So what is the ABU?

It's a professional association of the broadcasting organisations in the Asia-Pacific region. Its members are the national broadcasting organisations, in contrast to transnational broadcasters.

We are one of eight such unions in the world and we are the biggest in terms of area served. Our region stretches from Egypt in the west to Western Samoa in the east, from China in the north to New Zealand in the south. That is about three-fifths of the circumference of the earth and contains about three-quarters of the world's population. We have at present nearly 100 members in about 50 countries and areas.

So what do we do?

We exist for a number of reasons, one of which is to help develop broadcasting in the region. Our membership is very diverse. We have some of the biggest and most developed broadcasting organisations, such as NHK-Japan and ABC-Australia, and also some of the smallest and least developed, such as those in Nepal and Norfolk Island.

We organise joint activities among the members, such as our daily television news exchange, Asiavision, and our other programme exchanges.

We provide services to the members, such as the negotiation of the rights for the major sports events and the provision of coverage of those, a technical advisory service that offers consultancies on engineering matters, and we represent the members at meetings of international bodies such as the ITU and WIPO.

We also publish two magazines, *ABU News* and *ABU Technical Review*, as well as books on various broadcasting matters, mainly technical manuals.

Among other things. That's a very brief introduction to the ABU and what it's on about.

If you'd like more information about the ABU, this is our address, our fax number, and our e-mail address.

So, let's get down to the serious business of this session.

The subject is: Bridging the gap — foreign and local programming.

I suppose the first question is: what is this gap? What are we talking about — bridging the gap?

Well, as I see it, it's a question of competition. Competition between the programming provided by the local broadcasters in their own country and the programming that is now bombarding the region from outside, via satellite and other means. And the question uppermost in the minds of many national broadcasters is: can we compete?

But there's another side to this matter. The other side is the wish or desire of Asian broadcasters to take their programming outside their own countries and outside the region. To project themselves and their country to the rest of the world.

We'll deal with each of these quite different and distinct gaps separately.

Imagine the dilemma of a broadcaster in this part of the world. He is running his cozy little television service, pleasing his viewers some of the time, more importantly for him—pleasing his government most of the time, maybe even making some money if his service accepts advertising and generally quite satisfied with what he's doing.

Then all of a sudden, down from the sky falls television programming the like of which his viewers have never seen. Slick, sophisticated, high-quality, quite captivating programming. Attractive to the audience. Made with resources much greater than the local service can muster.

At first, our hero doesn't worry. Not many people have dishes to receive that stuff anyway. And in any case, people prefer programmes in their own language. No need to worry.

Then, three things happen. First, dishes spring up like mushrooms on a meadow all over the country. There's no way to stop them, because there's no legislation to control such things. Then, the transborder service starts providing programmes in the local language. Then, the government deregulates broadcasting and licenses other broadcasting services within the country, which begin with relays of satellite TV services from other parts of the world and a whole load of imported programming.

Suddenly the small, underfunded broadcasting service is deeply into competition. Unfair competition, because it can't possibly produce programming of the standard of the rich and powerful transnational service. He's losing his viewers, the satellite service is reaching the entire country, which the local

network's terrestrial transmitters can't do, he's also losing his advertisers because they want to be assured they have viewers.

You get some idea of the dilemma facing this poor director-general of a national broadcasting service in a developing Asian country.

Granted, this is an oversimplified scenario, but it does give you an idea of what is happening, to a larger or a lesser extent, in one country or another throughout the region.

So what can our intrepid D-G do about it? He's got two choices. He can either fight or he can throw in the towel. If he has the will or the incentive to fight, he has a number of weapons he can use.

I remember a speaker at a similar conference in a session dealing with this very subject a few years ago saying "If your family is eating out all the time, you'd better improve the home cooking!" In other words, if the viewers prefer the product from outside, it's time you improved the domestic one.

That's not so easy to do, you say. The local service is constrained, financially, politically and sometimes culturally. That's true, of course. But, if your service is going to compete, the constraints must be lifted or gotten around somehow. Otherwise, you may as well join that other guy we met earlier and give up.

You've got some weapons on your side. For a start, you know your audience. Or you should. If you do know them, you know what they like, so you have some useful knowledge that the satellite system based in HK or Singapore doesn't.

One thing that you can be sure they like is programming in their own language or languages. And who is in a better position than you to give them that? Also programming that is set in places they know. In other words, programming they can relate to.

A famous Canadian television expert by the name of Moses Znaimer once put together what he called the ten commandments of television. Three of them say:

- The best television tells me what happened to me, today.
- TV is a much about the people *bringing* me the story as the story itself.
- As *worldwide* television expands, the demand for *local* programming increases.

And that is your great strength as a broadcaster in your country. You can provide that kind of programming, more easily and more effectively than someone somewhere else.

Of course, the broadcaster must improve the quality of his programming as well. The range and variety of his programmes, as well as the actual production and technical quality. The hardest part of that is not so much a money or resources problem — although that's important as well. No, the biggest problem is the political one. The hardest lesson for broadcasting organisations in many countries to learn is that the television service cannot any longer be just a vehicle for putting across the government message. That is a legitimate use for a government-run broadcasting service, of course. But it is not one that will win viewers and listeners. And if you are serious about competing with the foreign programming in your country, then you must stop regarding the service as that and nothing else.

So what the broadcaster has to do is sit down with his political masters and make them aware of this simple fact and sell it to them. Convince them that if they are to compete and win the audience, they have to provide a different kind of fare. Convince them that, if the family are eating out all the time, it's time to improve the home cooking.

The fact of the matter is that every programme on television must be an entertainment programme. I've said this on a number of occasions in the past and have got involved in some mighty arguments about it. But it is a simple fact. The only way you are going to win an audience and keep it is to *entertain* that audience. You must give them programming that they find attractive and will choose to view. Because they now have a choice. And only a half-wit would choose to be bored!

That doesn't mean that you must throw out all your excellent public education programmes, for instance, or your cultural programmes or even your government information programmes. Not at all. But what you have to do is redesign them so that they become entertaining and appealing. That requires a bit of imagination and a bit of creativity. But it also needs a completely different attitude on the part of the broadcaster. The old days of the audience having to accept whatever you dish out to them are gone. They now have a choice. And they are going to choose the channel that entertains them. Even when it's informing them and educating them.

Not so easy, you say, but it has been done. India is a very good example. When the national broadcaster there, Doordarshan, was presented with a challenge from satellite broadcasters, it reacted instantly and effectively. It revamped its programmes and reallocated them on its networks. It started its own free-to-air movie channel to compete with a pay-TV movie channel. And it launched movie channels in three regional languages. And it started its own international satellite service.

And it won. The latest figures I've seen show that Doordarshan was being

watched on 52.5 million TV sets in the country, while the satellite channels between them were reaching only 18.5 million. In addition, and probably most significant, is that Doordarshan's advertising revenue is much greater than all other channels.

I know that's an oversimplification of the Indian situation, which is really very complex. And Doordarshan has made its mistakes as well. But at least it rose to the challenge in a proactive way.

So it can be done. The gap can be bridged. If it can be done in India, it can be done in other countries. And it is being done in other countries, of course. What it needs above all else is the will to do it. The professional will and the political will.

So now let's look now at the other side of the story. What does it take for a broadcaster to break away from its national boundaries and get its programming seen and heard in other parts of the region and other parts of the world?

I guess the first question is: why bother? Surely the national broadcasters of Asia are busy enough providing programming for their domestic viewers, so why should they even think about trying to widen their reach?

I suppose there are many reasons but I guess the most compelling is that there soon won't be much choice. Broadcasting is rapidly becoming globalised and I believe that in a few years any broadcaster worth the name will be transmitting programmes domestically and internationally. After all, most broadcasters of any size now have shortwave radio services, so an international TV service is the next step, which many have already taken.

It is becoming easier and cheaper to do this and I think this tendency will continue. Perhaps it will be a question of prestige for the broadcaster and for his country. Besides that, many Asian broadcasters are now targetting programmes at the communities of their own nationals living in other countries. In addition to which, it could prove to be quite profitable.

There are various ways in which your programming can be seen in other countries. The obvious one is, of course, by satellite. Quite a few of the larger terrestrial broadcasters in the region now have satellite services, either as part of their own organisation or as a subsidiary company. Satellite transmission is becoming more available and less expensive as we move into the digital age.

But there are other ways.

The obvious one is to produce programmes and distribute them on tape, which some are also already doing successfully and profitably. But that requires an

efficient business organisation if it is to be done properly. But there is no reason why the broadcasters should not form alliances with other companies. I'm surprised that more are not doing this. They have the product and I believe there is great potential for business partnerships between them and companies with the resources and know-how to market that product.

And don't forget the Internet. I believe the Internet is going to offer enormous opportunities for broadcasters in the future. Already many have their own websites and some are offering their own radio programmes on them in real time. At present, video on the Internet is slow and cumbersome, but as the new streaming technologies are developed, television will be easily available — and that is not very far in the future.

I think the broadcasters should right now be looking very closely at the Internet as a way of going global and making positive plans for it. Some of the international broadcasters, such as CNN, have really sophisticated websites that offer interactivity and much more. They will be among the first to take advantage of the new technologies. It's time the national broadcasters started thinking very seriously about this, so that they don't get left behind. It's cheap and it's simple to establish your presence on the Internet and I'm surprised that more of them are not taking it more seriously.

At the ABU General Assembly in 1994, we had a long and interesting discussion on the subject of Asian broadcasters exporting their programming to other countries in the region and the rest of the world, under the title *"Asia Speaks Out"*. In partnership with our good friends of the Hōsō Bunka Foundation in Japan we are now involved in a follow-up project aimed at encouraging this very thing to happen and helping those broadcasters who want to get involved in it.

I don't intend to say anything more about the *"Asia Speaks Out"* project because my friend and colleague from the Hōsō Bunka Foundation, Mr Shimizu, will be giving you much more information about it in his presentation later this morning.

What I would like to spend a few minutes on, though, is the most important aspect of this whole thing — the programmes. The technical means are there, the business side can easily be taken care of, but what is needed is programming of a style and a standard that will appeal to people in other countries.

Regrettably, too few Asian programmes meet those criteria. Many broadcasters seem to think that they can just take some of their domestic output and transmit it or sell it to those in other countries. That is just not so. In my view, programming that is to be exported by any means must be especially produced for the purpose. The fact that a particular programme is highly successful in the ratings in your own country doesn't guarantee that it will succeed internationally.

In fact, it's most unlikely that it will.

You must know your target audience and design your programmes for that audience.

Another thing that is essential is originality. Far too many programmes that we see in this region are simply clones of American, or occasionally British, programmes. Just about every country has its own version of *Wheel of Fortune*, for instance. In fact, some companies make a lot of money selling templates or whatever they might call them. Formats on which local programmes can be produced. If you want success in the international marketplace, be original. Find a new formula.

On the same lines, one of the things that will make people buy a programme from Asia in preference to one from the United States is that it is uniquely Asian. That it is a programme that could only have been produced in Asia. So, look for something that is unique to your country and unique to Asia.

It goes without saying that the programmes must be of the highest production and technical quality. Second best will not do if you are competing with the best. Your equipment must be state-of-the-art, your creative people the best you can find and your productive staff real professionals, preferably with experience in the market you are trying to penetrate.

Actually, it's not such a great time to be the programme director on a television station right now. As everybody keeps telling us, broadcasting is a very changing business these days, so a programme director might be forgiven for not quite knowing which way to turn.

What is he to do about all these fantastic new developments that are bombarding us — multimedia, video on demand, interactive TV. It seems that every month there's a new and more exciting way to change your programming. What should he do?

My advice is: do nothing. Don't let it bother you. The simple fact is that a lot of clever people are *experimenting* with a lot of new techniques, all of which they say will totally change television in the near future. To that I say — absolute balderdash! Utter rubbish! Eventually, some of the new things will catch on. Some of them already have.

But they are not going to *change* TV as we now know it. They are going to be add-ons. Or alternatives. The reason for that is very simply human nature. People are not overnight going to change the way they use their television set. And most people regard their TV set as a means of relaxing and of being entertained. In a passive way. Are we going to see all the couch potatoes

suddenly sprouting? No, they are going to go on wanting to be entertained by their TV sets for a long time to come.

In fact, I can't believe that there is now a debate going on amongst the boffins over what will prevail — what will dominate as the viewing means of the future — the TV set or the computer. That is a non-issue. The people who are having that debate completely forget the most important person in television, the viewer. He or she is the one who will decide the future of television in the age of new technologies. And any change will be very gradual indeed.

Television is a people business and no broadcaster can ever afford to overlook the people he's serving, because they are the ones who decide whether a programme, a network, a new innovation or a new technology will be a success. *They* will decide the future of television. □