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Impact of Transnational Broadcasting on Regional Society and Culture

by

Bhaskar Ghose
IMPACT

OF

TRANSNATIONAL BROADCASTING

ON

REGIONAL SOCIETY

AND

CULTURE

Bhaskar Ghose
The advent of satellite transmission has caused a revolution in broadcasting of unequalled proportions and impact. Television in particular has been transformed. The limitation that has inhibited the medium viz., the limited area that a transmitter could cover has suddenly given way to transmission from space and the prospects are that the next two years will see a proliferation of satellites not just over single regions, but over the entire world linked to each other, and transmitting programmes of different kinds on a multitude of channels. The Global Village has indeed arrived.

Technology has not been limited only to satellites. Digital compression is round the corner, which will mean even more channels with more programmes. Hardware available to programmers is also changing very fast. New kinds of cameras, video effects units and other state of the art equipment is making it possible to produce different kinds of programmes which are, in qualitative terms, getting to be more and more slick and complex. This will mean that, around the world, all television viewers will have a vast array of programmes to choose from, and the purveyors of these programmes will use all possible means to influence the viewers' choice. The age of public funded television is possibly coming to an end, as the pressures of the market place make more and more Governments re-think their positions and take a good look at the money that is being spent on broadcasting. State funded educational broadcasts may stay, but it is not unlikely that the future will see a diminishing of public funded radio and television, whose place will be aggressively taken by commercial networks and programmes.

Yet there will be some immediate limitations. A dish antenna can look at only one satellite at any given time; consequently, as more and more satellites jostle for position in space above the earth, the only way
of getting to a mass audiences will be via cable networks. Cable operators will become key figures in the future, whether one likes it or not. It is only they who can invest in sets of dishes to receive programmes from different satellites. Individual owners of dishes will not have access to all available channels; a few affluent ones will have motorised dishes but these will be few and far between. The bulk of the viewers will take cable connections and, while television sets will begin to provide larger numbers of channels and, perhaps, the sets themselves will begin to cost less, there will eventually be more channels of television coming down from space than can be accommodated on a television set. The cable operator will then become a kind of demigod determining what viewers will see and for how long. He will select his channels on certain considerations and, thus, will be someone whom programming organisations will woo sedulously. In time he will become the most crucial person of the television business, for without him most people will not begin to get television signals barring the one or two that they may be getting terristrially.

So much, then, for the prospects. What does this mean in terms of programme content and what will that in time do to audience tastes?

There is a certain standard response to both parts of the question. This is on these lines: programme content will, inevitably, cater to the largest number of viewers, given the fact that television will be market oriented, and market driven. There will be a great deal of competition to make 'pop' programmes: the more 'pop' the better. As more and more 'pop' programmes are churned out, the effort to grab the viewer's attention will mean more sensation, more glitz, more 'outrageous' (meaning vulgar) and more 'daring' (meaning indecent) fare and channels will try to outdo another in this race. This is, in the main, the standard response.
To an extent this is true. One has to look at television in the United States to realise what market financed programming means. A study says the average American has seen 14,000 murders and 26,000 scenes of violence or sex before he or she is 18. A specific case was cited in the celebrated Granada TV series 'Television', of a 14-year old boy in Miami who shot and killed an 80 year old woman living next door and his defence in court was that television, and not he was to blame: his lawyer argued that he had seen so many murders on TV that it had lost any significance for him and killing the old lady was not a very big event to him. In the event the plea failed, but that does not dilute the fact that such a plea was taken, obviously in the belief that it could succeed.

Of course, not all American programmes are pure violence and sex: there are some fine programmes which have come to be regarded as classics, such as the PBS series "The Civil War" and it is also true that the nature of commercial programmes is not always the result of market forces but of the very nature of the medium. An audio-visual medium demands action, drama and sensation: it is ill suited to ponderings on the nature of truth, or the various aspects of the art of writing biographies. Not that these cannot be done, and done well, but the other kind is easier. Nowhere is this more true than in news bulletins: action is good news, such as the war in Bosnia, or the coverage of a natural calamity. A fall in the value of any particular currency is difficult to put across as interestingly. Yet this must remain only a secondary reason for commercial programmes: the overriding reason is the market.

Earlier in this paper I said that the standard response was true "to an extent". I hasten to elaborate on this. Commercial television may become the norm but it will not, in my view, ever be all that there is
to it. There will always be a handful of really good programmes and as long as they are there an element of choice exists. Furthermore given the ultimately large quantities of commercial programming, a viewer can see only a finite amount and to that extent it will not be the kind of cultural bombardment the standard response implies. We also tend to discount other cultural influences, all of which can, in certain circumstances, be very powerful, such as films; personal communications and interpersonal relationships in schools, colleges, work places and the house; books and magazines, and a host of others. Not all of these are of the same nature as commercial television, nor do they have the same value systems or cultural assumptions. While not denying the almost hypnotic power of television, there are there, and, to that extent, there is again an element of choice, this time between the media.

There is no doubt that transnational broadcasting will speed up the process of the breaking down of old values and relationships: one of the reasons is the fact that social structures are already beginning to change under the influence of other factors like industrialisation and urban expansion, and the other is that the images of change that commercial television projects are magnetic and very persuasive, and to the young, the old ways seem rather dreary after seeing all that. This is not to ascribe a magical power to broadcasting but only to acknowledge its potential. At the same time, the ability to induce change is not without limitations, one of which is mentioned a little later. A further limitation is in the process of change itself, as cultural identities are merged in a common "plastic" work of sensation and glitter.

At one level, one might see a shared set of attitudes emerging from change: the screaming may be in different languages, but the reaction to Michael Jackson in Bangkok, Singapore and Bombay will be roughly the same.
But these shared responses forge no bonds except very transient ones. Perhaps because they bring with them no understanding or perception that merely a near animal response to pure sensation. The emergence of shared responses can only benefit the market place, for with the passage of time they will no longer have to segregate programmes and telecast to specific audience. All these will be the same, finally, and one kind of programme will do.

The limitation to the change induced by broadcasting is, in most countries the social structure. A strong social structure can prevail against these changes. For example, a study conducted some years ago across India, when there was much anguish at the effect of commercial advertising on rural audiences, established clearly that in the rural areas of India, when a product was clearly not for them in their social and economic context they accepted it as such - and induced demands from members of the family were firmly stamped out. The advertisement for the product was then watched for its entertainment value. Even, if there is change, it will be or could be something other than that brought about by broadcasting. Moreover, in India the impact of television is really in urban areas, and of these, in those towns and cities where there are cable networks. In other places, and in all rural areas, transnational broadcasting is not available, except to a handful of prosperous households which can afford a dish antenna.

It is also in these areas that social structures and relationships are still very strong: the changes coming in are gradual and, at present, not very radical. Television viewers here have access only to the primary channel of Doordarshan (Indian Television). The impact of this also has to be seen in the context of the basic profile of the average viewer. In a large part of the country, programmes in Hindi and English are not understood:

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the only television they can understand is from the regional TV Station telecasting in their mothertongue. Of course, the another substantial part of the country where Hindi is understood can follow the national programme and respond to it more.

Transnational broadcasting is, then, really affecting the major urban areas. How radical the effect is difficult to say in the absence of detailed surveys, but that it is a major influence is obvious from manifest behavioural patterns.

Even in these areas, however, social structures have not changed entirely. There is change and to a fair degree, but in essence, the structures and values persist. What is evident is a dichotomy: for example, the festival of the Goddess Durga in Eastern India is held as it has always been, but some of the images have changed with the times and others have not. Where it has changed, some changes are very interesting and artistically attractive and in some very crude. So too the changes which could be ascribed to transnational broadcasting would almost certainly be a mixed lot and in a substantial section of the TV viewing households there would be no change at all.

This is not the place to examine the reasons why traditional social structures and relationships are so strong in India. It needs, however, to be noticed as a major factor which will continue to temper the effect of transnational broadcasting. A minor indication of this is the fact that a recent market survey showed that in a metropolis like Delhi, the percentage of TV households with cable connections has dropped by 2% and the most common reason cited was that the parents did not want their children to see the sort of commercial programmes being telecast as "entertainment".
The long term effects will depend a great deal on the development in technology, and as is well known, these are taking place at a breathtakingly rapid rate. If in just two decades it is possible to go from terrestrial transmission to satellite transmission and in this field to move from electronic news gathering to satellite news gathering using uplinks which fit into two suitcases it may be that we will move from dish antennae which receive signals from one satellite to those which receive it from several, and to satellite transmissions which like those in the Ku Band, require very small antennae. There are reports of a Russian "coupon" satellite using a phased array antenna which allows customers to choose their specific area of coverage however small, and where the uplink and downlink are free from each other, providing transmissions which can be received by a dish antenna "less than one inch in diameter". Its location is reported to be very convenient for South Asia. Additionally, the costs of these would come down drastically. Thus, transnational broadcasts would be not only on very many more channels but more easily and cheaply received. Technology may even eliminate cables.

Given the vast number of programmes coming to more and more households even strong social structures may over time give way to the values enshrined in transnational broadcasts, which will inevitably seek similar responses from all viewers wherever they are. The responses to this age of transnational broadcasting will need to be considered seriously before it actually comes upon us.