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Opportunities For Pluralism : Crossing Language Barriers

By

Bhaskar Ghose

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PLURALISM : CROSSING LANGUAGE BARRIERS

by **Bhaskar Ghose**

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The advent of private satellite television has brought to the fore a debate which has been a part of the media scene in other parts of the world and has now come to Asia. This is the debate on the existence of monopoly broadcasting, funded by the State, which is engaged in public services broadcasting, and a multitude of privately owned networks or channels, which are commercially driven and which compete with one another, and with the hitherto monopoly broadcaster. This is not something which has been consciously stimulated; it has happened owing to technological advances which have made State control over electronic mass media irrelevant in most countries, and very shortly in all. As receiver dishes and their attendant hardware get cheaper and smaller, as "dishes" change their shape and become thin squares or rectangles, they will be virtually impossible to detect, and programmes from across national borders will, inevitably, be received and watched in more and more homes in every country.

The debate centres round the nature of broadcasting: is public service broadcasting and its protection of traditional cultural values to be preferred to commercial broadcasting the contents of which are tailored to the earning of the maximum profits possible? Behind this is a larger issue, namely, the tensions between political and economic globalisation and the assertion of national and cultural identities which is perceived as a vital issue as "the nation-state has been the main container and organiser of people's economic and political action as well as their social and cultural identity, (and) its decline in the face of globalisation, if it is a decline, poses major questions as to what forms of social structure and legitimation will take place across the whole range of social action, economic, political and cultural." (Nicholas Garnham : The Mass Media, Cultural Identity and the Public Sphere in the Modern World published in Public Culture 1993 University of Chicago.)

As the electronic media have been seen as one of the crucial infrastructure of economic and cultural globalisation, the argument becomes, obviously, much sharper and of greater import than it would seem, according to some, since the pluralism that commercial broadcasting brings with it is actually a vehicle for globalisation. The operation of market forces brings, it is argued, bigger and bigger organisations into play, and transnational giants emerge, taking more and more time and squeezing smaller operators out. Thus the globalisation that sets in is compounded with it being in the hands of a few powerful interests, sheltering behind the 'free flow of information' argument.

There is the other argument. Monopoly broadcasters are often seen as arbiters of mass taste, of acquiring from this a power "that government have come to fear" (Roland S. Homet Jr: Politics, Cultures Communication, p51. Praeger Publishers, New York.) Even if governments are not frightened, they will readily admit that this can be stifling and that it can deaden creativity. What is called public service broadcasting is often terribly dull, badly made programmes that drive viewers away. In the name of protecting traditional cultural values, the most dreary of programmes are served up, day after day.

Without getting involved in the moral aspect of the debate, it needs to be said that the very existence of two kinds of broadcasting must tend to heighten each other's need to improve programming quality and technical finish, which cannot but be welcomed. It is in this context that pluralism in the media needs to be seen, and the difference that it makes wherever it exists has always been noticeable.

In India, as perhaps in other countries, the endeavour of policy makers has been to be as realistic as possible. It has been accepted that it would not be practical to impose sanctions on private broadcasters and indeed on cable operators: the regulations now governing the cable operators are relatively minimal, and recognise the conditions under which they receive signals from channels in foreign countries. It is only for movie pay channels that operators are required to ensure that the mandatory certificate from the Central Board of Film Certification is displayed before each film as required under the Cinematograph Act, as the taking of the channel is a deliberate decision and done with the knowledge that the films shown do not carry any such certificate when uplinked to the satellite.

A particular feature of the region is the multiplicity of languages. Broadcasts in English have very scanty viewership and no one language can cater to the vast number of viewers covered by the channel footprint. This is at once a strength that local networks have and an opportunity for others. An opportunity that is difficult, as Indian broadcasters have found, but one which technology is helping out in a new and interesting manner. A research unit of the Department of Electronics has developed a programme which can super subtitles in six languages on a programme, leaving it to the transmitters to determine which one they will take. Thus a Tamil programme can be seen all over India with subtitle in five other languages at the same time. This now makes it possible to reach out to a much greater audience than before and address them directly. Initial experiments with feature films have been successful; although there have been reports of the translations not being very appropriate. This, however, is a minor issue and remedial steps are being taken.

Earlier, the use of dubbing had been tried. In fact, one of the major recommendations of a very seminal conference organised by NAMEDIA, the media foundation of non-aligned nations, was that a Centre for Dubbing be established to overcome the language problem. Dubbing was, however, not received well in the country, mainly because the States do not merely have different languages. It is not like Europe, where everything else is more or less the same- dress, appearance, basic habits, etc. The States of India differ very substantially from each other. A Gujarati shopkeeper and Tamil farmer have virtually nothing in common. For the Gujarati shopkeeper to then see a Tamil farmer speaking fluent Gujarati is jarring, and is not accepted. The only solution is, as a result, subtitling.

What does this scenario offer the private broadcaster? The provision of programmes in more than one language is already being done by at least one channel, but the use of subtitling technology has not yet started. In fact, it will be a long time before they have access to technology which will enable them to provide simultaneous subtitling. Till then selected programmes in different languages will be the only way to keep audience in different language groups.

This is the essence of the paradox that faces all transnational broadcasters. They are, for better or worse, confined to one language, perhaps two, but in a magazine format which gets only viewers from those language groups. At the same time, as mentioned earlier, it is an excellent opportunity for national broadcasters like Doordarshan which has a network of stations in different languages to rework its programming so that it secures overall a very large audience.

Work on developing technology for multi language programming has no doubt to continue, and, as time passes, there is no doubt that more and more sophisticated systems will emerge, to make accurate subtitling in many more language possible. But the ability of this alone to attract audiences will, in the final analysis be limited. It will work for certain programmes like feature films, but may not be so effective for, to take an example, chat shows. The establishing of regular channels in different languages is the only answer: a very expensive affair which only the largest transnationals will consider, but it is very likely that they will do so: the prize is the one everyone is after, larger and larger audience.