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Television - Some Critical Issues

by

Lal De Mel
By Lal de Mel - Director International Advertising Association

'Legal and Regulatory Aspects of Satellite Broadcasting' was the subject of a seminar held in New Delhi from 21-23 October. It was organized by Asian Mass Communication Research & Information Centre with support from The Commonwealth Secretariat. Delegations from SAARC countries who were present at the seminar reviewed the communication policies of each country and the social, cultural and economic impact of transnational broadcasting on these countries. Ms. Dayani Senarath, Deputy Director - Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation, reviewed the National Censorship guidelines and advertising codes of Sri Lanka for radio and television.

Ms. Sabina Kelaart reviewed the National communication policies and legal frameworks affecting broadcasting. She pointed out that the United Nations General Assembly in its Resolution No. 59 of 1946 stated that 'freedom of information is a fundamental human right and is the touchstone of all the freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated. The Sri Lankan constitution of 1978 although guaranteeing the freedom of expression in general terms, has no provision regarding the freedom of information and the right to receive information. However the Supreme Court in Visuwalingam v Liyanage in 1983 claimed that the right of the public to know is necessarily implied in the right to freedom of expression.

'Broadcasting Programming and Advertising Content - Critical Issues' was the subject of the paper presented by the writer. The material presented by the delegates was used to prepare basic guidelines for programming and Advertising content of transnational (Satellite) broadcasts.

The Group was of the opinion that legislation, even if feasible, would not succeed in ensuring respect for national sensitivities by the transnational broadcasting organizations. The strategy recommended consisted of involving apex bodies like Asian and Asia Pacific Broadcasting Unions, SAARC, International Advertising Association, and promoting wider appreciation of the issues with the help of all social and cultural organizations active in the region.

It is necessary for all national interest organizations and individuals to express their disapproval of programs and advertisements which they consider to be harmful to our society, in order to minimize the negative impact of television. Some of the critical issues reviewed by the writer are given below with the aim of creating greater public awareness of the negative impact of some television programmes.
VIOLENCE

The US National Institute of Mental Health concluded after extensive research that watching violence promotes violence and aggressive behaviour of children. At the recent hearings before the US Senate Commerce Committee the US Attorney General Janet Reno warned the television networks that if they failed to curb violence on television before the end of this year, the Clinton administration would join Congress in restricting violent programmes by law.

A few months ago questions were raised in the British Parliament regarding the role of television in the significant increase in juvenile crime. The British Prime Minister John Major drew attention to the excessive violence shown on television. The Sri Lankan born member of Parliament - Niraj Deva Adithiya said 'if you watch the week's programmes and count the number of murders and guns, you will find these are phenomenal numbers. This is portrayed as normal life.'.

The President, His Excellency D.B. Wijetunga in his recent address at the opening of the new radio broadcasting studio complex pointed out that no attempt should be made to lead audiences into temptation by showing foreign films and programmes that teem with scenes of various crimes, terrorist acts and cruel behaviour, as showing such scenes without any restraint would have a drastic effect on the minds of children and youth, who often flock to watch such action-filled scenes on television.

Islandwide television was introduced in 1982. Terrorist activity escalated in 1983, leading to the backlash in July 1983. Is it possible to say that this was a coincidence and the introduction of television had no impact on what happened in 1983? According to an article in 'Newsweek' of 1 November 1993, two young men, one in Pennsylvania and the other in New Jersey, acted out a scene they had seen in a film called 'The Program' by lying down on the centre line of a local highway as a test of courage. Unlike the movie character, each was quickly run over and killed. The popular action programme 'Renegade' shows an ex-cop practically taking the law into his own hands. Is there a possibility of this programme inducing army deserters to imitate the 'Renegade' or Navy deserters to engage in acts of piracy?

An analysis of the programmes of a privately owned television station showed that action-oriented programmes account for an average of thirty minutes per day viz-a-viz fifteen minutes by a state owned station. They will be tempted to increase the number of action oriented programmes and films, if the ratings and thereby the advertising revenues increase as a result of an increase in the number of violence oriented programmes. Concerned advertisers as well as the advertising agencies should boycott violence oriented programmes, even if they are mild by foreign standards.
IMPACT ON MORALS AND ETHICS

Professor J B Dissanayake in his address to the Press Association of Sri Lanka said that children of today learn their morals and ethics from TV and hence TV has taken the place of the temple. He went on to say that TV programmes show more immoral and unethical incidents than anything else.

FAMILY VALUES

Former US Vice President had the courage to object to a TV heroine being shown as an unmarried mother, on account of the role model played by her and its impact on family values. The family values displayed in many foreign programmes are entirely different to Asian family values. Unmarried mothers are not accepted by our society. Frequent newspaper reports of infanticide appear to highlight the changes taking place in the values of young people. The change in moral values induced through high exposure to foreign TV programmes is bound to increase the generation gap as well as the gap between the Urban and Rural people.

CARTOONS

The major findings of western research on the impact of cartoon films on young minds are:-

a) Cartoons promote and justify violence
b) They create questionable characters and encourage imitations of these idols
c) They desensitize children to violence
d) They contain horror scenes which can so frighten young children as to leave scars.

Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Superman had been guilty of as many as 82 acts of violence in a 28 minute screening. According to western child psychologists the theme of most cartoons, including 'Popeye' is that all problems can be solved through brute force.

Daily cartoon programmes account for over one hour of television transmission time of one station. They should review the time allotted for cartoon programmes. All stations should pay special consideration to the guidelines on promoting with special care the interests of children and youth, ensuring their full development and protecting them from exploitation and discrimination.

IMPACT ON STUDIES

A US Education Department survey indicated that 90 million Americans can barely read or write. Of the two areas identified as contributory factors, TV emerged as the more devastating influence. Students who watch more than six hours TV per night had much lower reading scores than their counterparts.

Sri Lanka is an education conscious society with a literacy rate of 89%.
Television programmes without any educational content which commence at 4.30 p.m. can wean children away from their books and create problems for Sri Lankan parents as well as the nation. Television stations should not be permitted to breed television addicts by offering prizes for watching all their television programmes, for the purpose of entering a competition, as it amounts to exploitation of children.

LOTTERIES

According to the guidelines on the Prudent use of the Electronic media submitted to the Cabinet, the constitution of Sri Lanka contains 'Directive Principles of State Policy and Fundamental Duties' and the state is pledged to safeguard these principles of policy. In those listed as relevant to media, the first is to raise the moral and cultural standards of the people. In the code of advertising standards prepared by Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation at its inception, it is stated that an advertisement must be clearly distinguishable as such and recognizably separate from the programmes. Lottery draws on TV account for 80 minutes of programming time per week. They appear to be contrary to the guidelines mentioned above.

According to the findings of the National Media Survey carried out by Lanka Market Research Bureau, Shanitha Vasanawa, the most popular lottery programme attracts 28.4% of the rural TV viewers and 31.2% of the 15-19 year old age group. Lottery programmes are also popular among the elderly and appear to provide a means of escapism to the poorer sections of the population. It is possible to defend lotteries as a soft alternative to gambling. The possibility also exists that to some young people it is the introduction to gambling. China banned the promotion of lotteries through TV, despite the high popularity of such programmes. We need to carry out Sociological studies on the impact of lotteries on the buyers of lottery tickets, if we continue to promote lotteries through TV. The use of lotteries to promote the sales of goods to children is questionable.

NEWS PROGRAMMES

The viewers are happy that they are in a position to watch BBC news broadcasts at any hour of the day. Many viewers through letters to the Editor have expressed the desire to listen to the views of BBC on the events in Sri Lanka. Every attempt should be made to allow Sri Lankan viewers the freedom of information, if the subject matter is not of a nature which affects national security.

CONCLUSION

The problem of controlling transnational broadcasts is likely to increase with the rapid advances in technology, which might make it possible for small dish antennas to receive transnational broadcasts. If such broadcasts enter Sri Lankan air space without state approval, it is possible to treat such broadcasts as intruders invading our privacy rights and capable of hurting our sensitivities. Can unauthorized material which intrudes into our air space become the subject of copyright infringements?
The government has acted wisely in licensing three private television stations to provide the Sri Lankan viewers with a greater choice of programmes. It has made dish antennas redundant. All television stations have so far acted in a reasonably responsible manner. There should be no room for television stations to be guided by ratings and ignore issues of national interest. The decision of the Minister of Broadcasting and Information to appoint a monitoring committee is a step in the correct direction. If the monitoring committee is unable to watch all the programmes and monitor the number of acts of violence shown in each channel, this function can be handed over to the Market Research organization which monitors television commercials. The benefits of television should outweigh the negative impact of this powerful medium.