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Why Public Broadcasting?

Background Paper Prepared by

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The renowned novelist and member of l’Académie française, Jean d’Ormesson, wrote that the two most important institutions that can contribute to the broad cultural development of his country were education and television. By cultural development he meant not only the arts but generally the development of mental and imaginative faculties that enable people to give higher meaning to their lives and to society.

When broadcasting - that is radio - was invented in the 1920’s, many leaders of our societies marveled at its promises and at what this extraordinary instrument could do for the culture, education and information of the people. Today, the rhetoric often remains, and it now includes television, but the will to make the proper use of these technologies has weakened. Policy makers in all countries have allowed radio and television to often become trivial and shallow and more of a marketing vehicle. Having started in North America, this development has spread quickly to European broadcasting and is reaching the rest of the world. Third World countries will not be spared, despite their obvious need for a kind of television that pays attention to the cultural, social, educational and economic needs of people.

In developing countries, as elsewhere in the world, TV viewers are naturally entitled to some entertainment from the small screen; the role that can be played by comedy or drama in expressing culture and identity, together with peoples’ hopes and sorrows, is well known. Nevertheless, should we not be concerned about the probability that such extraordinary instruments of communication might be completely dominated by industries catering to audiences not as citizens but as mere consumers to be delivered to the business of advertising?

According to author Dominique Wolton, Eastern Europe for example is also "ready to take the plunge into the alluring world of commercial television and deregulation, even though the price to be paid for the delights of market-driven broadcasting will be certain loss of cultural identity — along with the attendant risks of cultural backlash".

The communications landscape has undergone obvious changes and change will continue. More and more TV services are becoming available. In the liberal democracies, governments and regulatory bodies find they have little room to manoeuvre. They are faced with a host of socio-economic pressures in
favor of a greater number of television channels; demand from audiences for access to the wonders of new technologies; competitive pressures from neighboring countries that have been faster off the mark with new services; pressures as well from business interests that want to develop these new services and from advertisers who are always on the lookout for new ways of delivering their messages.

A further factor to consider is the great fascination audiovisual activities have held for young people over the last several decades. This too has played a part in the proliferation of TV services around the world. All these social pressures are making their effects felt. The multichannel television universe is made possible in part by many technological developments — Hertzian waves, co-axial cable, fiber optics, satellites, digitalization and the compression of signals. The increase in the number of channels will inevitably lead to even greater competition among broadcasters for the attention of viewers.

In North America and in countries of Western Europe, people spend on average around three hours every day watching television or listening to radio. Many don't watch at all, others watch or listen a lot more. Business organizations spend billions of dollars to reach these audiences with their commercial messages. As to politicians, they often think, rightly or wrongly, that radio and television are the key to their success or the cause of their failure.

If television and radio attract so much attention, why is it that we have not used these media more actively, more imaginatively for educational, cultural and social development? At the advent of broadcasting in the early 1920's, prime ministers, presidents and many political leaders were immensely excited by the potential of this new media for the betterment of society. In Canada, Prime Minister R. B. Bennett, in a speech to the House of Commons on May 18, 1932:

"In this stage of our national development, we have problems peculiar to ourselves and we must reach a solution of them through the employment of all available means. The radio has a place in the solution of all those problems. It becomes, then, the duty of parliament to safeguard it in such a way that its fullest benefits may be assured to the people as a whole."

In the United States, Herbert Hoover, then Secretary of Commerce — and later a Republican President — said in a statement to a House Committee in 1924:

"Radio communication is not to be considered as merely a business carried on for a private gain, for private advertisement or for entertainment of the curious. It is a public concern impressed with the public trust and to be considered primarily from the standpoint of public interest to the same extent and upon the basis of the same general principles as our other public utilities."

In the UK, Lord John Reith, the first Director General of the BBC remarked:

"To have exploited so great a scientific invention for the purpose and pursuit of entertainment alone would have been a prostitution of its powers
and an insult to the character and intelligence of the public."

Certainly, we should not condemn all of contemporary broadcasting but there is no doubt that the fear of people like Bennett, Hoover, Lord Reith and others, namely, that commercial advertising might drag broadcasting more in the direction of shallow amusement and triviality than in the direction of social and cultural development, was well founded.

As years went by, the development of broadcasting in North America, in Western Europe was indeed driven - barring very few exceptions - by the logic of the advertising business and the entertainment industry, the "fun industry". In the ratings game that rigorously controls that industry, success and failure are measured not in days, weeks or months, but in terms of minutes and even seconds. And these successes and failures translate into revenues amounting to millions if not billions of dollars.

In a strictly commercial, competitive system, programs that lower ratings are out. What remains is entertainment formulas with a proven ability to draw large audiences. Moreover, an integral part of this approach is the systematic use of violence and the ruthless suppression of programs which demand too much concentration from the viewer or dampen on the pace of the action.

A further trend is the extent to which even public television broadcasters often feel obliged - or are, in fact, compelled by financial constraints - to compete with private sector television. In effect, whether they are large or small, they have to deal with a difficult quandary. They make use of a medium that has traditionally addressed mass audiences. This means rivalling with commercial broadcasters, who, as just noted, have to deliver the largest possible audiences to their advertisers, from quarter hour to quarter hour. If, on the one hand, their audience is too small, political authorities may consider them to be an elitist luxury. If, on the other hand, they try to expand their audience by resorting to more lightweight programs like those offered by private competition, then people question the purpose they served.

Therefore, when one looks at the nature of television in so-called western countries, or one listens to most of radio, it is normal to wonder whether these media can really serve development in developing countries. It is not surprising that people who, by their occupation, have to deal with very concrete issues of society like housing, unemployment, poverty, health, migrations and violence do not put broadcasting at the top of public priorities.

However, the consequence of this chain of circumstances is that developing countries in the South or in the East, countries that are emerging from totalitarian regimes, may not benefit from media systems dedicated to the imparting of knowledge, to the understanding of the problems of their society and of their future. Very often, through a sort of dumping process, they are more likely to inherit the by-products of our northern "fun industry".

We are facing a problem here that obviously applies not only to the role of broadcasting as an instrument of development for poorer countries but to its role in richer societies as well.

In a speech to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in February 1992 Vaclav Havel, the President of the Czech Republic, was describing what he considers some of the greater problems of civilization. After referring to some of the key environmental contemporary issues, he went on to list "the dramatically widening gap between the rich North and the poor South,
the danger of famine, the depletion of the biosphere and the mineral resources of the planet" and "the expansion of commercial television culture" as part of what he calls "the general threat to mankind".

If this appears to be a too pessimistic or exaggerated perception, it may be because the communications environment that has developed around us is so overwhelming that we have become accustomed to it and that we find it difficult even to imagine any other set of circumstances. Perhaps we have lost the capacity to react and therefore we need philosophers and dramatists like Havel to alert us to the drama of our world.

The misgivings concerning the perception of frivolity or triviality that our radio and television programming often projects may well be founded, but why must we accept this state of affairs as a basis for national or world policy? Why can't we react like those who marveled at the potential of broadcasting technology at the outset, and why can't we try to imagine how it could be used?

Why not use the media much more imaginatively so that, in developing countries, they can help people to understand the problems and possibilities of their own societies?

Isn't democracy the constant and progressive improvement in the level of participation by all citizens in the decisions affecting their lives? Democracy is not only the greater ability of professionals - politicians, professors, accountants, engineers, officials, artists or thinkers - to debate and manage the affairs of the community. This is why the so-called mass media which are accessible to ordinary people and which can address society as a whole can be so strategic, provided they are used for the benefit of citizens and not only as a vehicle to reach potential consumers.

There is a great deal of talk and excitement about the accelerating pace of technological development in electronic communications. The constant reference to the information highway has become a somewhat fastidious cliche carried by an ubiquitous bandwagon. At the same time as so many are waving their hands on that bandwagon, can anyone seriously claim that there is a great improvement in the content of the media that the mass of the people watch and listen - these ordinary people who are the basis of democracy?

Yes, there is - and there will continue to be - a remarkable improvement in the communication technology that serves business, industry, government and academia. But there is hardly any improvement in the way we use the "community media" - that is radio and television. Will we in fact have sophisticated information highways for business, government and academia, and fun and games for the majority of people — "for the masses" as the phrase used to go?

A public service approach to television and radio, as opposed to a strictly commercial approach, would also contribute to cultural diversity in our world.

"A diversification among human communities," said A. N. Whitehead, in Science and the Modern World "is essential for the provision of the incentive and material for the odyssey of the human spirit. Other nations of different habits are not enemies: they are godsend. Men require of their neighbors something sufficiently akin to be understood, something sufficiently different to provoke attention, and something great enough to command admiration".
"When we consider what I call the satellite culture" said T. S. Eliot, "we find two reasons against consenting to its complete absorption into the stronger culture. The first objection is one so profound that it must simply be accepted: it is the instinct of every living thing to persist in its own being... It would be no gain whatever for English culture, for the Welsh, Scots and Irish to become indistinguishable from Englishmen. What would happen, of course, is that we should all become indistinguishable featureless "Britons", at a lower level of culture than that of any of the separate regions.".

Depending on the circumstances and the person who speaks, the word "culture" may mean the arts or the way people behave, the way they cook or eat, or it may refer to intellectual property or entertainment. And the phrase "cultural industries" is now frequently used, meaning film, television, prerecorded entertainment, periodicals, etc.

In his "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture" T.S. Eliot says that culture, "...includes all the characteristic activities and interests of a people: Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar."

While this is a wonderful definition, it is more practical when we speak of public policies to adopt a somewhat more focused definition. One that refers to formalized expression and interpretations of nature, of human behavior or human hopes or goals. We may say therefore that culture is what a country says to itself, and about itself to others, whatever the technique of expression may be: theater, film and television, novels, recorded entertainment, painting, architecture or ballet.

It is of course what makes a people interesting, worthy of attention by the rest of the world. It is how the people — the individual members — of a country express their dreams and hopes, and how they talk about their past and their future. It is what they care about. Like life itself it is infinitely diverse and constantly evolving. The identity of a country is of course expressed by the style and works of individuals. Not by the definitions of government. It is the result of a process not of definitions. That is why in democracies governments are expected to establish only broad frameworks for the facilitation of cultural expression by the people. They must not get involved in content or style.

Culture is, of course, the conservation and appreciation of past accomplishments, but it is also innovation, creation. It is what makes one nation feel equal to another, not in richness perhaps, but in dignity. It is sovereignty of the mind. Indeed, culture lies at the very heart of political sovereignty. There can be no political sovereignty, therefore no authority over our own lives, our own future, without cultural autonomy and vitality.

1Notes Towards the Definition of Culture, T.S. Eliot, Faber and Faber, 1948
Some believe that market forces will bring about the best possible
broadcast service for the population. We, in the World Radio and Television
Council, believe that broadcasting is a matter of social interest like education
and that public policies and institutions are necessary for the benefit of
citizens and society. And we believe that this can be achieved without
compromising independence and freedom of speech.

Such an attitude is sometimes interpreted as anti-American. It is not.
American culture is something we should seek, not fear. Just as we should be
curious about Chinese, African, Spanish, Japanese, German, French or Arab
culture. In our view, there is a broader more fundamental issue than the
threat of American "culture" which policy makers should be facing - namely
what should be the role of television in our midst.

Most countries in the world have taken the position, when radio was
established and later when television was developed, that these media would be
used for education, culture, information, entertainment and enlightenment.
Countries have not always pursued these objectives with consistency,
commitment or ability. Moreover, present technological and industrial
developments pose tremendous challenges for them as to how these original
purposes should be achieved. But the important point was and remains for
countries to establish fundamental policies. How to achieve chosen policy is
indeed a difficult matter, but it becomes enormously more complicated if the
basic choices are not clear.

I have sometimes described a broadcasting system which associates
broadcasting entirely to marketing and industry as an unfortunate error which
has caused grave cultural deprivation not only to the U.S. but also to the rest
of the world. It creates a cause for concern for the development of broadcasting
everywhere and particularly in those countries where television may switch
from being an instrument of political control and boredom to become only a
medium of merchandising and commercialized entertainment.

The basic issue therefore is whether broadcasting will be considered
mainly as an industry turning out a commercial "product" and associated
totally with marketing? Or will it be first of all an institution to permit access
to culture, knowledge and enlightened entertainment for all the people? In
other words, should broadcasting be assimilated to education and other public
services or strictly to business?

Moreover, is culture a value that should be accessible to all people, like
education, or should it remain a luxury available for those who can afford it?
And in this respect what use should we make of these enormously potent
instruments called radio and television?

There are considerable efforts by the U.S. entertainment industry to
combat the kind of cultural policies described here. This, for sure, has nothing
to do with a defense of American culture, and even less with a greater diversity
of cultural choices in the world. It has everything to do with trade, industry
and profits.

Interestingly, I have never heard an American writer complaining that his
books are not allowed in countries like Canada or a filmmaker deploring that
his films are not seen in Europe.

Cultural or broadcasting policies should not be intended to preclude the
entry of the works of writers, composers, producers and actors from other parts
of the world, including the U.S. And generally they do not. They should be
intended to ensure that people of talent in any particular country will be able
to find audiences for their works. It is clear that a strictly commercial approach
to television - even in large and rich markets - is not reconcilable with cultural
goals. Such an approach is even more unrealistic in smaller countries and in
most countries of the world.

As a consequence, the most basic element of broadcasting policy in our
view is the maintenance, development and support of strong and politically
independent public institutions. The history of public radio and public
television over the last fifty or sixty years has revealed the many pitfalls that
such institutions can fall into, the many weaknesses they can develop or the
many faults they can commit. It is wiser however to find the ways to improve
these institutions than to change the system.

The private sector in television should not of course be exempted from all
social and cultural responsibilities. If the implementation of such
responsibilities requires some fiscal incentives or direct assistance similar to
the techniques that have been applied in the film industry, then they should be
considered.

Technological developments, and the so-called information highway, will
allow the creation of a much larger number of audiovisual channels - call them
pay-television, pay-per-view or interactive television. One unfortunate result
will be greater and greater competition and aggressive commercialism. Currently, there is a great deal of concern about violence on film and television.
There is a chance that in a more commercially competitive context there will be
more violence, not less.

Countries will need to insist more on the positive, that is on a type of
radio and television that is based on the idea of public service. Marketing is
fine. We need more trade, more economic activity. But we also need more and
better education, more training, more enlightenment, more understanding of
what our world is all about. We need it for the public at large because in a
democracy it is the public at large that is entitled, and fortunately sometimes
empowered, to participate in our basic political decisions.

There is hardly any task more important in the broad area of culture than
rethinking the role that radio and television could play concerning education,
citizenship, democratic values and the enlightenment of our societies and their
people.

Where both imagination and statesmanship are needed, is in the area
where profits cannot be the motivation, that is: providing all the people, in
developed as well as in developing parts of the world, with the material for the
mind, and the imagination, that are needed to make them free citizens and
inspired human beings.