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THE CURRENT BROADCASTING SITUATION IN SRI LANKA, EXPECTED CHANGES, PROBLEMS FORSEEN AND RESPONSES PLANNED (IF ANY)

Broadcasting in Sri Lanka enjoyed a monopoly from the inception till the dawn of the 1990s. The broadcasting Act was amended making provision for the advent of Private Electronic media organisations. This opened up a whole new vista in the field of broadcasting.

In the third world country such as Sri Lanka, Radio enjoys a wide popularity despite the incursion of TV. It is the poor man's source of entertainment and education. Radio combines the benefit of low cost, a wide reach and access. It offers many exciting possibilities for fulfilling the aspirations of the people, accessing information, education and entertainment. There are over 5 million radio receivers in the island. The numbers could be much higher, as most households have more than one receiver.

The SLBC is headed by the Chairman, a Board of Directors and the Director General. The Director General is the Chief Executive. There are three Deputy Directors General for Finance, Engineering and Programmes. Each division is headed by Director and the others at management level are the Controllers followed by Organisers, the production staff and on air presenters. The three Language Divisions, Sinhala, Tamil and English is headed by a Director. The Commercial and Marketing Division, the News Division, Training Research, Engineering, Education, Finance and Administrative Divisions function independently. The staff strength is 2018.

The dawn of the '90s saw a number of private owned Radio Stations springing up equipped with the latest state of the art equipment. Very young and an innovative staff revolutionized the concept of broadcasting introducing many western practices. The SLBC did lose a part of the market share both in listership and air time sales.

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THE CURRENT BROADCASTING SITUATION

At present the SLBC has several channels, broadcasting in three languages, Sinhala, Tamil and English. Extra weightage is nevertheless given to Sinhala, because 2/3 of the population speaks the language. There are separate channels in each language for Public Service broadcasting and Commercial Broadcasting. There is also a channel for sports. Shortwave transmissions beam to the Indian sub-continent in English, Tamil, Hindi, Malayalam, Urdu and Kannada.

A one hour transmission in English is beamed to South East Asia and Australia. There are four Regional Stations in the country catering to the communities of those areas. In addition there are a number of community radio stations which are very popular with the farming community. There is a great deal of listener participation in these programmes and much agricultural information is imparted through this medium. A lot of hidden talent is also discovered through the listener participation programmes as the simple farming community delight in performing over the radio. Programmes reflect the local culture and are essentially rural based and responsive to the needs of the community. Programming has been broadbased to draw in the business community as well, in order to make them self reliant, viable entities.

The staff were not geared to meet the sudden competition. It was not possible to change overnight, the monopolistic tendencies ingrained in them for over 70 years. Slowly but surely the tide has turned and the SLBC is trying to achieve its targets.

The private radio stations cater mainly to the youth. As a rule SLBC does not indulge in sensationalism. Credibility is still with the SLBC, as the highest listenership recorded for any radio station is 'News time' on SLBC. The corporate bosses and decision makers are still with the SLBC. The SLBC is the only Radio Station with in depth programmes and serious classical music catering to the discerning listener. It has its own niche on the music scene, and satisfies diverse musical tastes.
The public Service Broadcasting system has been restructured to make it dynamic and people oriented. It functions to fulfil the national goals of democracy, development and nation building. Instead of announcers and producers being compartmentalised, they are encouraged to evolve more fully as Radio Journalists with 'on the spot' coverage of activities and going directly on air to report 'live' incidents via cellular phones.

The accent is now on 'live' reporting with actualities, rather than on stereotype studio productions which do not grip the attention of the listener. In this day of satellite broadcasting and globalisation of the broadcast network making it is easy to access programmes of your choice, public service programming on the domestic network has to be more creative and dynamic to stay alive. As the State Radio, SLBC has a special responsibility to set standards in public service broadcasting.

The News Division works round the clock, with four main bulletins, a World Bulletin and news snippets on the hour and the half hour. News Bulletins are sponsored by Corporate clients. The identical news items are carried in all three languages, Sinhala, Tamil and English. The News Room has access to the wire services and Internet facilities. It is the 'Hub' of the station and provincial correspondents feed the news room with news from around the country. A team of news reporters operate from Colombo.

The Disc Dubbing section has very sophisticated equipment and carries on a lucrative trade in dubbing cassettes and compact discs. The local Artistes make good use of this facility.

The Training School organises programmes for new recruits and refresher courses for officers in service. The National carrier and several organisations also make use of SLBC’s facilities for training purposes.

SLBC’s funding comes from Radio Licences and the revenue from Commercial Broadcasting.
EXPECTED CHANGES

An FM project is being implemented. Phase I of this programme has been completed. The equipment for the Second Phase is on order, and work is expected to be completed on the FM transmitters by the end of this year or early next year the latest. After the completion of the project, the entire country will be covered by the FM network. Sri Lanka's topography is such that the FM network would cover most parts. Medium Wave transmitters are still in operation, but they cover selected areas and their operational and maintenance costs are very high. FM is superior to that of the medium wave coverage, area wise as well as quality wise.

COMPUTER AIDED BROADCAST SYSTEMS

The transition from the conventional Analog system presently used at SLBC to a modern Digital Broadcast system is envisaged, as it is mandatory for any broadcasting organisation to stay competitive. Also the increasing cost of analog equipment will make the transition imperative.

Digital storage systems are to be introduced as an improvement to the studio set up. A sophisticated system of computer software will provide multiple radio studios with dependable, simultaneous access to an inventory of digitized audio. These will have instant access to all the stations recorded audio from all studios at the same time.

The computer aided system would convert recorded radio commercials, jingles, announcements, news reports, short programme feature or music to digital audio data, store it on computer hard disc, then provide dynamic access to it for production and on air broadcast. There will be facilities for non disruptive editing - while on air.

The endless tape recordings, would be curtailed and consistent digital quality will be ensured.

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Concurrently with the introduction of the Digital audio broadcasting systems, staff will be trained to handle the new technology. The SLBC has taken every opportunity offered by ABU, AIUB and CBA to train technical personnel in Modern Broadcast Technologies. The corporation even sent an additional officer at its own expenses for the Deutscheweelle – ABU funded training programme in Digital Audio Broadcasting held in Kuala Lumpur last year.

STRUCTURAL CHANGES

Structural changes are to be introduced soon, as numbers have become unwieldy and the major part of the revenue has to be set aside for remuneration. Introduction of Digital Broadcasting systems would necessitate a reduction of the workforce. Excessive cadres in clerical and allied disciplines are a drain on the station's resources. The Corporation hopes to offer a package deal, 'a golden handshake' as it were to induce the older employees to take early retirement. This is expected to reduce the workforce by about 60 per cent. This would ensure speedier promotion for the younger members of the staff making the establishment more dynamic and open to change.

Computerization is underway. The Finance Division has been computerized, and the Marketing Division is next in line. This will streamline activities of the Marketing sector to cater to its clients more efficiently and to cut down on delays in billing, scheduling etc. More aggressive marketing strategies are being planned to compete with the private Broadcasting Stations.

Enhanced coordination between language services and the News Division is being planned where the concept of a Radio Journalist will be brought to the fore. Special teams will report, script, edit and present news and current affairs programmes. Investigative reporting will be initiated.
New revenue avenues are to be created without compromising public service values. Commercial programmes exploiting traditional assets such as the Archives have become ready money spinners. The prospects are limitless and these avenues are to be explored fully with financial benefits to the Corporation and immense cultural social and personal satisfaction to the listener. Even in this digital age, with proliferation of delivery systems, SLBC is confident that public service broadcasting could retain its identity.

PROBLEMS FORSEEN

The conversion from Analog to Digital will require an excessive financial commitment. SLBC will face quite a problem in finding the resources for it.

The station has irreplaceable resources which will have to be transferred to the Digital Storage System. The time factor will be quite a constraint to the programme. The time factor involved could create difficulties.

The Digital Audio System is more complex and the staff will require careful training. Exposure to the intricacies of the new system will also mean time and money. Training facilities will have to intensified.

A mass exodus of staff taking voluntary retirement could initially cause problems, till the set up is streamlined and made more productive. The time of transition could have many pitfalls.

Computerization will also require a staff that is computer literate. In the haste to increase revenue avenues care must be exercised not to compromise high ideals, hitherto maintained by the station.

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RESPONSE PLANNED

The restructuring of the SLBC would take into account the available staff. A clear cut policy would diminish and cushion the transitional constraints.

Attempts will be made to obtain foreign resources for the introduction of modern broadcast technologies.

As the right to impart and receive information is a constitutional right enshrined in the National Broadcasting Policy, SLBC will always be conscious of the fact that the Airwaves are public property and must be used for the public good.

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