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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Syed Salahuddin Zaki</td>
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Public Service Broadcasting: Sustainability in the New Media Order?

Syed Salahuddin Zaki
Director General, BTV.

As the last decade decays and slowly fades into oblivion to reach the fag end of the 20th Century, as Time’s eternal bell tolls the knell of a departing millennium, we receive beacons of a new era, an era of multifarious media proliferation, an era constantly riddled with fast growing myriad permutations of high-tech communication systems. The era might also see gigantic efforts to disseminate information throughout audio-visual images propelled through multi-channeled media, no meagre in number, might over-load and confuse the audience at the receiving end. If enough scopes of human judgement are not built in the messages, the media may enslave and dehumanise the audience putting them in doldrums, making them increasingly fastidious, and as such difficult to please.

A confused, chaotic gloomy picture?

FROM CHAOS TO ORDER

The seminar is on MEDIA PROLIFERATION: HOW CAN BROADCASTERS BEST SERVE THE PUBLIC INTEREST.

The left part of title of the seminar describes a situation comparable to a period in the past when the word ‘proliferation’ was attached to ominous nuclear activities. However, the right side of the proposition positively speaks of the stand of the users, ie, the broadcasters, to discipline the apparent chaos and make best use of the proliferation to create a purposeful NEW MEDIA ORDER. And all these efforts are obviously for the PUBLIC INTEREST. And we all are here to deliberate and decide.

The topic allocated for today’s discussion is:

PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING: SUSTAINABILITY IN THE NEW MEDIA ORDER.

The topic has two parts. The first part identifies PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING whose definition, function and extended connotation is definitely well understood by this august gathering. The second part quite clearly expresses an apprehension, casting shadows of doubt over the very existence of an existing system of organisation prevailing in most of the Asian, South Asian countries.

In the UN World T.V. Forum 97, I distinctly remember the observation that converging digital technologies of television, telecommunications, entertainment and personal computers will sweep away traditional means of broadcasting all over the world soon, ushering in an era of communications that will alter the nature and role of broadcasters.

But in the seminar the questions raised and discussed were:

a) How global is the question of convergence?

b) How will the impact of new technology be managed?

c) Do different parts of the world have the same preconception, views and desires? To what extent cultural, socio-economic and POLITICAL differences taken into account?

In the recent past, on similar topics hours of discussions in seminars, conferences and workshops have been recorded, volumes of written materials have been piled but general discussions without specific references tend to submerge the subject under a sludge of platitudes. So, if we examine prevailing
media situation of a particular country and identify problems, we might be in a better position to get clues to formulate answers and strategies best suited to all others countries with similar situation and background.

COUNTRY SPECIFIC LOOK:

BANGLADESH is my obvious choice for various reasons. It is a small country with very high population density and very low literacy rate. Innumerable rivers criss-cross and inundate the flat delta making land transportations difficult. Calamities like flood, drought, cyclones associated or followed by epidemics are frequent gifts of nature. Man-pulled rickshaws are the highest form of locally generated transport technology available for urban people and slow moving sail or manually paddled boats are available for rural mass. And it is a country, believe me, which goes without any newspaper, (a bliss, may be !) for more than two weeks in a year and a country where strikes often outnumber working days — BUT a country with a Govt. controlled RADIO SERVICE form 1940s, and a single terrestrial Television channel from 1964 giving UNINTERRUPTED transmission service for the public till date. Initially TV peculiarly enjoyed autonomous corporation status till 1975 when it became a fully government controlled organ of the Ministry of Information.

Bangladesh Television, popularly known as BTV, now has quite extensive network of terrestrial transmission, covering about 95% of physical area with average 72 hours of broadcast time weekly airing varieties of programmes including NEWS. And though the beginning of BTV was benign, but later on particularly in the political arena in the past years it has become something of a NEWSMAKER in its own right in Bangladesh.

T.V. as an all-purpose source of entertainment and news has become a recognised social and cultural phenomenon, a craze for privileged intellectual elites, a neurotic hysteria for narcissist politicians, comparatively cheaper-status-symbol for sandwiched middle-class and still a magic-box for most of the awe-stricken rural mass.

BTV, when it began its humble journey in early 60s, was a pilot station broadcasting mainly studio-based entertaining programmes based mostly on indigenous culture. Audio-oriented audience had curiosity but apparently showed no craze for it. Verbose politicians found no specific interest as the reach of the T.V. transmission, unlike Radio, was very much limited. News-gathering was meagre and news presentation, too, did not carry any extra importance/weight.

But in the late 60s as the reach of the visual transmission expanded and as political polarization and schism between erstwhile East and West Pakistan began to take place and as CULTURAL ISSUES (unique situation !) including language, secularism started to occupy the pivotal-point of political polemics often overshadowing economic issues of disparity etc. and when ultimately cultural activists started to act as catalyst and driving force to all mass-movement and when voice of independent cultural identity, political identity and national identity was projected through various programmes and presentations, the power disseminated through visual medium started to turn into a potential cultural weapon.

Brutal army retaliation and sacrifice of cultural activists is now a tragic part of our history of Liberation.

Why do I bring this chapter from history ? This is the period of ‘focus’ on T.V. This is the period of when political powers, realizing the power of visual medium, envisaged exploitation plans to control news, prepare highly biased and motivated propaganda programmes. A mass awareness about T.V. sharply grew during this period. During the 9 months Liberation War, the T.V. was merely a New-Nazi factory dictated by the Military Junta.

After liberation, a rejuvenated cultural force started to grow around BTV. Role of BTV during initial period immediately after liberation was definitely people-oriented, dedicated to social change. Rising from after-war “anguish of the marrow, ague of the skeleton,” BTV’s broadcasters fulfilled the expectations of millions newborn postwar audience. But traces and trends of pre-independence legacy of ‘shaping’ news could also be felt.
However, BTV emerged akin to the concept of Public Service Broadcasting we understand or aspire to have today. The most important gain of T.V. during this initial period was its public acceptance — acceptance as a credible medium of expression with valuable content. Along with educational, informative, positive, motivational programmes even pure entertainment programmes carefully written and produced by the then BTV had social relevance and ameliorative tones and were received by the growing audience with due seriousness.

To sustain such gain, the policy makers did not come out with any long term perspective media policy or plan. So the period was short lived and a great opportunity was missed. But things started to take a turn as post-war economic instability, international conspiracy, inept administrative control coupled with precarious law and order situation prompted a panic-stricken, wayward Government to convert fledgling autonomous BTV into a fully-fledged Government controlled organization for no valid reason at all. Such conversion had a price which the party that fell very shortly through a nasty Military conspiracy had to pay and even today, as hands of history’s clock brought the same party in power, BTV is paying the price of that unjustified whim and yet to go back to the right course and gain the lost status.

Very soon, brutal killing of the Father of the Nation, drastically changed the scenario. Lackeys of the killers promptly turned BTV into a box of falsehood: distorting history, gaging news, polluting even cultural tradition and social values. The technology of freedom became a headless toy and a tool of tyranny for the enslaved viewers as there was no other channel available for them.

But even in this suffocating situation, even in the midst of such disservice to public, the professional producers of BTV did continue with programmes of public interest keeping audience alive.

Voices could be heard from the mass for a free, fair electronic media. Voices soon turned into mass demand and in late 80s demand for ‘autonomy’ for Radio and TV made a place in the manifestos and agenda of two major opposition parties at that time striving for democracy. After a mass-upsurge and an election under a Caretaker Govt., the party that came to power conveniently forgot their election promise and ignored the much publicised agenda of ‘autonomy’ – though in my opinion ‘autonomy’ without major change in attitude would result in nothing. I shall elaborate my comment later on.

Once again it was found that the audience got a refreshing short period of balanced news, unbiased programmes during interim Care-taker Govts.

Govt. in power did one thing. It “allowed” cable operators to operate and in no time STVRs, popularly known as dish-antennas engulfed urban areas dishing out menus of rootless entertainment programmes almost bordering on degeneracy. Only refreshing and welcome channels were BBC, CNN or say ‘Discovery’ channel. Again it was a whimsical decision to allow ‘uncontrolled’ delivery of such channels. There was no policy guideline for media whatsoever. Other information gadgetry, computers, faxes and varieties of high-tech telecommunications slowly made natural entry. BTV having superior reach of transmission watched the arena apparently unperturbed, airing hackneyed routine programmes, still retaining monopoly position collecting huge amount of revenue from advertisement.

An auspicious theory is propagated by the advocates of the Govt. to defend absolute control and use of Public Broadcasting system: Since Govt. machinery plays a major role in all economic, cultural social and political spheres, it has the right to ‘inform’ people as and when required and as they wish.

Yes. No contention about such design. Access to information is a fundamental right of the public. But Public Broadcasting Systems are not private channels of the party in power who assume the role, of a High-Priest to deliver sermon under the guise of ‘information’ through a biased unidirectional valve, reshaping, rearranging and at times suppressing facts. And audience, exposed to various types of channels beamed from the open sky, an audience having facilities of individual, personal access to information, entertainment through available gadgetry will not be loyal to a controlled channel.
1996 once again after a mass upheaval, a more people-oriented, party with pro-liberation ideologies and commitment came back to power after a gap of about 21 years. This party has the privilege of the support of the bulk of the cultural activists, media people and intelligentsia.

Print-media is probably experiencing the golden time of non-interference from any quarters. The party manifesto of this party clearly embodied autonomy status for Radio & TV. A high level committee was formed. The report of the committee is with the Ministry of Information awaiting positive action. But in the mean time an interesting development —made things more interesting. An entrepreneur (ETV) got permission to establish a proper private channel to operate in Bangladesh using infrastructural facilities of BTV (eg., BTV's existing 17 transmission towers). “A step more than autonomy”— commented the Ministry of Information!

Operation of a Private Channel backed by highly professional and technically qualified persons from abroad would be an interesting phenomenon to watch soon. BTV’s revenue earning may be affected this time. The Private Channel would locally generate NEWS also. This is REVOLUTIONARY and most important phenomenon to watch. So there will be an immediate comparison between ETV & BTV’s News forcing policy makers to change ‘attitude’ towards NEWS casting in BTV. (Hopefully!)

In the last two years, withstanding the challenges of cables, one of them is Bengali Language satellite channel based only on ‘robust’ dose of entertainment — BTV sustained and played a model role of Public Service Broadcaster doing hundreds of programmes on Education, health, sports, children culture and disaster management. Parliamentary debates/question-answer sessions are broadcast-live. One-and half hour LIVE accountability programme of the Prime Minister (Face to Face) made TV more credible. During last year’s unprecedented flood, BTV’s role was praised by International agencies. What made BTV to play such positive role for public interest? The answer is simple. The democratic atmosphere, may be in the fledgling state, helped a Govt controlled TV channel to come up with such programmes.

It is the “attitude”—that matters most, attitude of the party democratically elected to power.

And there lies the strength of conventional Public Service Broadcasters. Though as it stands today, BTV is a PUBLIC FINANCED, STATE OWNED, PARTY-IN-POWER CONTROLLED, MONOPOLISTIC non-return type of VALVE-FITTED profit earner for the GOVT. EXCHEQUER the facade may change—only if there is a change in attitude of the controllers. Sustainability of such type of committed broadcasting depends mainly on true democratic atmosphere. When I talk about attitude I talk about attitude of image makers also. If a broadcaster thinks that he is doing a routine job—it is one thing and if a broadcaster thinks that he is fulfilling a commitment—, a social responsibility then that is another thing. A salaried Govt. Broadcaster’s inefficiency cannot always be shifted to controls under which he operates. Living with competition in a multi-channel world is unavoidable now but if to compete means to compromise and compete on a so-called level playing field, with profit oriented commercial broadcasters the public broadcasters may lose its reason for existence. In my opinion CONTENTS are the keys for the survival of Public Service Broadcasters. What we put on television matters most. It is the content. Other factors are less important. Contents constitute the major impact of a programme presentation on audience. The better it is — better it will be accepted. Technology is subservient to contents carefully woven by image makers.

If I may quote Andre Malraux here who said: “The greatest mystery is not that we have been flung at random between the profusion of the galaxy of stars and universe, but that in this prison we can fashion images sufficiently powerful to deny our nothingness.” Powerful images are more powerful than arrays of technological innovations spurting out frequently.

Though technology is providing lot of gadgets every now and then provoking curious individual’s needs, the importance of general Public Service Broadcasting may never be diminished in coming years in countries like Bangladesh. I tend to agree with Robert Lamb (ED, TV TRUST FOR Environment, The Bigger Picture, UNICEF) that while there are new speciality channels and delivery methods offering opportunities for programmes to reach
targeted specialized audiences, the lion's share of the audience still watch the major
traditional terrestrial channels. Another important finding of Robert is that everywhere local
programmes are what the majority of people want to watch. Local culture can survive and
even thrive in global market. I have extensively described Bangladesh situation above only to
make some general observations and approach the question of sustainability from a practical
base.

In a developing country, broadcasting primarily needs to be functional. Development
programmes, nation-building programmes and programmes inspiring democratic principles,
programmes emphasizing needs of society etc. are few examples of functional components
of the public service broadcasting. Changes and advancements in technology are a
continuous in the progressive passage of time. But some changes and developments in
technology tend to have greater, far reaching impact affecting conceptual changes which
also in turn demand rethinking about priorities and strategies. Move from analogue to
DIGITAL is one of those generative elemental changes that caused CONVERGENCE of
multifarious audio-visual technologies affecting the very core of broadcasting concept and as
such having a tremendous impact on the process of programme production. The new
technologies provide new possibilities and new forms of broadcasting. The approach and
attitude of broadcasters having public service commitment should be positively responsive.
In this complex situation of media proliferation they should, for their perplexed audiences,
seek benefit and find ways to assimilate systems and services that meet the requirements of
Public Service Broadcaster's objectives. A wise man changes his mind for better strategy, an
obstinate never changes and face the consequence.

For the sustainability of Public Broadcasting System broad-based 'regulation's are a must. I
agree with Elizabeth Smith's propositions made at last AMIC/CBA conference at Singapore
last year. In our follow-up discussions we may throw more light on it.

Instead of drawing a conclusion, I would like to initiate a proposition saying that Public
Service Broadcasting is very much sustainable if- only if policy makers adhere to democratic
principles and allow electronic media to operate under such norms. On the otherhand to
create democratic culture and an atmosphere of tolerance, media's positive role is a must.
And again to play that role, wielders of power (ie, the politicians) should understand and
respect media. A very difficult proposition I understand. But a beginning in the thinking
process must start. Otherwise sustainability of the Public Broadcasting System would be in
jeopardy.

The danger lies in not bothering to regulate bombardment from the OPEN SKY. Instead of
caring about such invasions, putting regulatory impediments on Govt. owned Public
Broadcasting System would gradually diminish the number of audience.

Again, one must realise that mere deregulation and giving autonomy in the administrative
and functional sphere of broadcasting is not a proposition for survival. Media disseminators
must concentrate on diversified programming increasing the range. Changing consumer
behaviour must be considered to face the challenge. They must have strategies to create
powerful content and messages.

Messages, devoid of human interest and feeling, devoid of personal touch and proximity,
transmitted through any media can never constitute a positive, persuasive driving force. The
same problem hovers over electron-emitted bulk of emoted information where qualitative
value may become subservient to quantity. Value-less volumes of such Network may net
human minds like fish-only to make them insensitive, and inert. A contemporary receiver
cum consumer audience- would, many fear, be like a modern mariner, marooned and
shrieking:

MEDIA MEDIA EVERYWHERE
NOR ANY MEDIA TO PICK!