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BALANCING BUSINESS AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY GOALS IN BROADCASTING

By

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An invited paper to be presented in the seminar organised by Asian Media Information And Communication Centre on "Media Proliferation: How Broadcasters can best serve the Public Interest" scheduled for April 19-21, 1999, New Delhi.
I am indeed very grateful to the organisers of the seminar for inviting me to speak on a topic, which has not attracted much scholarly attention in the sub-continent. Also private broadcasting companies have not verbalised their commitment and goals of balancing commercial interests while fulfilling any social responsibility towards audiences, communities and countries in which they broadcast. It occurred to me that business and commerce is as old as a human history, but the electronic media broadcasting have had a very short history especially in the context of South Asia. Since there is an age-old distrust of business communities and businesspersons, so it is believed that those involved in trade and business are ‘anti-people’ and protect their business interest even at the cost of people. There is an underlying assumption of an inherent contradiction and conflict of interest between business and social responsibility of broadcasting. Hence, the need for balancing.

A fresh look is required to see whether there are genuine areas of conflict of interest between business goals and social responsibility. Further, such an assumption needs to be analysed in the wake of communication revolution. Few methods have been suggested for fostering the notion of balanced and responsible broadcasting.

Limited Efforts

During 1996-97, three national seminars were organized by TALEEM Research Foundation to discuss the ‘Social Responsibility’ of private broadcasting companies in India. The purpose of these seminars was to raise some basic issues of ‘social responsibilities’ of private broadcasting companies, which have mushroomed all over the country in the last eight years. In these seminars, it was felt that although there were a lot of journalistic coverage on the issue of social responsibility of private
broadcasting companies, little empirical research exists to indicate whether private broadcasting companies perceive their social responsibility and try to balance between business interest and social responsibility. Except sporadic ‘paid’ and a few ‘free’ social advertisement spots on civic and health issues and other awareness campaigns, no other forms of concerns have been expressed or seen on private broadcasting channels. In case of radio, which is supported by the government, the scenario is somewhat similar to that of television.

In this presentation, first an attempt will be made to trace the historical and political context in which the policy makers in India had tried to define “social responsibility” of the Government owned electronic media prior to their privatisation and arrival of transnational private broadcasting. It will be followed by selected analyses related to social responsibility of broadcasting in the areas of language, cultural domination and need for dynamic policies in the wake of technological advances and the crutch of films in broadcasting for profit without responsibility.

Social Responsibility

Social responsibility of broadcasting is rooted in the very core of democracy and democratic system of governance. The government owned broadcasting was thought to provide classical art form and cultural heritage to a faceless and imagined audience. Perpetuation and preservation of these traditions for posterity seemed to be the government’s responsibility. Keskar’s era of Indian radio characterised this phase. The other broadcasting responsibility during this era centred around informing the people about the plans and programmes of national development. Entertainment was provided through ‘non-film popular traditional music’. This may be seen as an elitist conception of social responsibility of broadcasting without business interest of any kind.

The major jolt to such a conception of social responsibility was the Indo-China War of 1962, when the policy makers were forced to re-examine the role of broadcasting in the protection of national sovereignty. Concurrently this was followed by educational broadcasting, the major technical breakthrough of satellite communication and move for the commercialisation of broadcasting. Also this is the period during which the Government controlled media cried hard for “autonomy” and got buckled under “internal emergency” to be become mouthpiece of government propaganda. There is no way to
know whether the autonomy would have made broadcasting socially responsible or would have emerged as a new force to protect business interests while meeting the social responsibility. Arrival of INSAT Satellite system helped spread and reach of broadcasting and also strengthened the grip of business interest at the cost of social responsibility. The process continues.

The fifty years of India’s broadcasting has seen very little changes except in the current decade in which private Indian and foreign broadcasting companies have thrown challenges to AIR and Doordarshan, especially television. The historical and political context of broadcasting of the half century that provides very little to go by as to how any balancing could have been possible between business and social responsibility goals of broadcasting.

Arrival of transnational private Indian and foreign broadcasting championed by Zee TV and initiated by STAR TV created a new era of broadcasting. The new era also brought about several new issues of ‘social responsibility’ in an entirely changed situation. Economic liberalisation, globalization and transborder exposure have created a multi-channel environment of broadcasting. Still no one is sure about the useful information and meaningful entertainment to the audiences in the sub-continent. Of course, competition has provided certain amount of restrain on the part of broadcasting companies and has led to major modifications in programme planning to meet the audiences’ expectations. In doing so, the aim has been to increase viewership in order to have better business. It does not mean that government supported or private broadcasting companies have taken their social responsibility seriously.

The foreign broadcasting companies are accused of a very different balancing game. This relates to broadcast of alien values life-style and social ethos. In a recent edited volume, these issues have been discussed at length by a number of scholars who have carried out a series of researches in several Asian countries (see Melkote, Shields and Agrawal eds. 1998). It has raised the problem of cultural domination and “undesirable” influences on the audiences.
Language of Broadcasting

Non-verbal and symbolic mode of communication that characterised the multilingual civilisation of South Asia has come under pressure due to unintelligible high verbal content and expression in the day-to-day communication process. Broadcasting, especially audio has been a major victim of increasing use of “verbal expressions” to denote the distorted “techno-social” and “Euro-American” realities beyond the national and cultural boundaries. Results have been disastrous for individuals, in their normal social interaction and for broadcasters in selecting broadcast language. Social linguists are busy analysing the changes in linguistic behaviour and consequent social changes.

Existing broadcast code of AIR, Doordarshan is silent on language issue except that “anything obscene; defamatory” should not be permitted in the broadcast. But the same is not applicable for private Indian and foreign broadcasting companies.

A broadcasting language policy exists at least in Japan, where no new word can be introduced in any broadcast until it is cleared by a body set up for this purpose. The new word has to be in usage for certain period and must be used by certain percentage of the speakers in the country before it is allowed in any broadcast. In absence of any such language broadcasting policy, one is aghast to note how often-private broadcasting companies are indiscriminately introduce new words. Hundreds of years of foreign colonial rules could not damage and distort so much the expressive and symbolic ability of a large majority as the recent broadcasting has done. The damages are both quantitative and qualitative which have led to “cognitive dissonance” in human relationships and to some extent has suppressed the voices of many including poor. The political idiom and metaphor, feminist views, minorities voices are getting choked in the loud bang of “Hinglish” broadcasting meant to please a small number of urban elite and professionals involved in media and advertising. The entire multilingual characteristics of the broadcasting in the country are reeling under such distortions. Who should be held responsible for all the distortions, as it negatively effects collective identity behaviour
and the national identity. There is a need of balancing this aspect of broadcasting with social responsibility.

Hence, there is serious need to have a broadcasting language policy so as language distortion can be minimised. The responsibility of the implementation should be mandatory and be a part of business policy of the broadcasting companies.

**Policy Lags**

There is a technological perspective while examining the issue of social responsibility of broadcasting. It is well known that policy makers have been technology neutral, oblivious and indifferent on the face of changing communication technology scenario. Hence, policy changes have not been able to respond to the technological challenges for creating socially responsible broadcasting whether Government supported broadcasting or privately run. A number of studies carried out for promoting business by broadcasting companies clearly indicated that these companies are extremely careful in ensuring that the cultural and political sensitivities of countries under telecast footprint are not touched. It is also because business interest could be compromised if the broadcasting companies do not respond to cultural and political issues positively. Observations indicate that a self-regulatory mechanism has evolved in deciding what could or could not be broadcast by the private broadcasting companies.

There is a lot of hue and cry about “invasion from the sky”. This invasion has challenged the sanctity of sovereign nations and their broadcasting policies. Therefore, it has become imperative to examine broadcasting policies in regional perspective, keeping in view needs of several countries of South Asia having common cultural heritage. Future policies must take into consideration the technological advances for formulating of forward looking broadcasting policies for South Asia.
Cultural Domination

Invasion from the sky has created a whole lot of speculation and theory building on the part of communication and media scholars. The cries of “cultural imperialism”, “neo-colonialism” have become political and scholarly issues for serious debate and discussion. In a recent book edited by Malkote and Dr. Binod C. Agrawal (1998) several contributors have echoed the fear of cultural imperialism by foreign broadcasting companies. While broadcasting companies definitely have profit motive at the core of their business philosophy, it is difficult to attribute any hidden motives in propagating alien life style for domination. Changes that have occurred in the context of programmes, both in terms of language and content do not warrant any such conclusion. On the contrary, it can be seen as a balancing method of maintaining business interest and be responsive to the viewers needs. Cultural domination seems to be taking place at a surface level without any deep routed changes in the social structure of the South Asian societies. On the contrary, it can be observed that indigenous changes created by the existing forces of change are much stronger than the external broadcasting forces to introduce any cultural domination. However, social change process will continue in which even an irresponsible broadcasting company can do very little to damage the social fabric as the enlightened citizens and alert viewers could react to stop such moves.

Need for Broadcasting Code

We have yet to find out any ‘code’ or ‘methods’ through which broadcasting companies can balance between their business interest and social responsibilities and discharge their obligations towards the society and people for whom they are broadcasting. At present unambiguously, the aim of the broadcasting companies, whether supported by the Government or run by the private companies, is to make quick bucks by providing “cheap entertainment”. An enlightened North Indian urban housewife who once asked, “why all television channels telecast only Hindi films, film songs and film based programmes” vividly expresses this aim? The answer to her question lies in the philosophy and need for broadcasting code.
Earlier, it was thought that there are two opposing paths which can be adopted by broadcasters; either help provide entertainment, recreation to a leisure class ignoring the developmental needs and aspirations of large majority or assist in reconstruction and development through education and information considered critical for national development. In this argument there is an implicit assumption that broadcasting cannot fulfil both requirements. In the present context “either” or “or” paradigm needs to be carefully examined as it may be a misplaced view. There is a need for fusion of several complementary roles that broadcasting can play without hurting business interest or development needs with a great sense of social responsibility.

**Film Crutch for Profit**

The most popular programmes both in the radio and television are music; films and film based programmes produced by private film producers as a full-length commercial cinema. Today the driving force of the broadcasting comes from film industry and not from broadcasting. Hence, one must look at how the film industry manages it and balances its business interest and social responsibilities. In the colonial India, often nationalistic and social objectives drove the film makers into the production of films which reflected problems of the time, issues of untouchability, widow remarriage and country’s freedom from colonial rule, to mention a few. These nationalistic fervours worn out in the post independent phase and the same have been replaced by new ethos. These new ethos have now penetrated in broadcasting. At times there seems that these Indian broadcasting companies are so profit driven that they don’t even want to think about their social responsibility. At the same time, they are being controlled and played into the hands of advertisers and the industry and are ready to broadcast anything so long it pays them.

In the corridors of several broadcasting companies one hears very little about anything but sale of advertising time, rating of the programmes and the concern of the shareholders and the stakeholders. Any programme on radio or television that earns advertising revenue attracts most attention of the broadcasting companies as well as the advertisers and the programme sponsors. The only social responsibility that these companies are concerned with is the responsibility towards their profit and of the share and stakeholders.
Concluding Remarks

The burden of argument in the discussion has been seen in several arenas. The important among these are:

1. Business interest has developed self-regulatory mechanism by which it is difficult to escape from certain social responsibilities towards the audiences, communities and countries. Some broadcasting companies have expressed pro-social desires by incorporating messages of national development and better citizenship. It is not entirely altruistic, but a part of a planned strategy for keeping high profitability and be seen as benevolent broadcasting company.

2. There has been clear policy lags in the wake of technological advances which have created a serious gulf between social responsibility and accountability of the broadcasting companies, especially the government supported on one side and the profit making private broadcasting companies on the other who have very little concern about socially responsible broadcasting.

3. Cultural domination through foreign broadcasting has created serious debate without much concrete evidence to support the theory of “cultural imperialism”. On the other hand, broadcasting companies have been forced to respond to the cultural needs of the audiences in order to survive in the highly competitive broadcasting business.

4. Irresponsible broadcasting can be seen in the language used by the private broadcasting companies, which reflect a myopic view of a few who would think that a new lingua franca can be created for the purposes of broadcasting. Such attempts have been clearly reflected in a number programmes aired by various private broadcasting companies through ‘Hinglish’ as a means of verbal communication. Also they have tried to motivate the audiences of a “non-verbal symbolic cultures” into a “verbal ethos” for communicating ideas and views. However, these are also cyclic phenomena and have started showing signs of disappearance.
5. Film being the mother of both radio and television for sustenance has defined the rules of broadcasting business and consequently given direction to their social responsibility. The earlier cinema had certain vision of the society. Since a shift has taken place in cinema to create “present orientation”, “high consumerism” and “individualism” and the same are being emulated by broadcasting companies regardless of their ownership. There is a need for critical examination in this area in order to demand socially responsible broadcasting.

Reference Cited

Melkote, Srinivas R., Peter Shields and Binod C. Agrawal eds.