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Media Proliferation: How Can Broadcasters Best Serve the Public Interest?
19-21 April 1999, New Delhi, India

Summary Report
SUMMARY REPORT

Some 40 senior managers from public and private broadcasting stations and communication specialists from Asia-Pacific and Europe participated in the regional seminar on “Media Proliferation: How can Broadcasters Best Serve Public Interest” held in New Delhi, India on April 19-21, 1999. Eleven countries were represented in the three-day event, namely, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Japan, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, England, Fiji and Seychelles.

Results of the seminar evaluation indicated that the respondents were highly satisfied with the results of the three-day event. Many of them gave high ratings on the relevance of the meeting to their work, presentation of speakers, overall quality of the programme and value of the meeting. (See attached Tables 1,5,6,8). They were also highly satisfied with the organizational efficiency, seminar facilities, and food quality (See attached Tables 2,36).

The comments listed on Table 10 reflected the general sentiment of the participants that the meeting was highly useful and well-organized. They suggested that more time be allocated for discussion of presentations and more local participants be invited and encouraged to stay during the three-day event.

Suggested topics for future seminars were also listed as seen on table 9. Among these are financing public service broadcasting (PSB), defining quality programming, media literacy, regulations on public broadcasting and empowerment of women in broadcasting.

In his opening remarks, Mr. Vijay Menon, AMIC Secretary-General, called on participants to go beyond debate to a consideration of initiatives and action in reviewing the role of PSBs in an environment where media products and services are proliferating in Asia. Ms. Elizabeth Smith, Secretary-general of the Commonwealth broadcasting Association (CBA), welcomed the participants and said PSB needs radical reforms to better serve the public interest. Mr. Gurnam Saran, president of EMPI Business School, said that effective management of broadcasting has become critical in a fast-changing media environment.

There were 22 presentations on the various issues related to the seminar theme. Mr. Kiran Karnik, CEO of Discovery Channel-India, suggested that PSBs must compete with private channels in creating new audiences and tastes, upgrading management and marketing skills and producing quality programming. He pointed out that niche marketing is critical as a strategy for PSBs and a means to serve public interest. He added that these are strategies public service broadcasters need to address to make them more sensitive to market preferences, more competitive and viable at a time when government resources for public broadcasting stations in Asia are dwindling.

Mr. Simon Dring, Managing Director of Ekushey Television, Bangladesh, said private and public TV stations can best serve the public interest by encouraging the production of quality programming, professionalism and thoroughness of approach in broadcasting.

Mr. B.S. Chandra Sekhar, Director of Audience Research, Doordarshan, India gave a comprehensive picture of broadcasting in India. On programme content, he noticed an increase in Hindu programme serials, sports and current affairs. He said that terrestrial TV is hardly investing on software, but is providing better quality signals to people in distant areas. More and more commercial viability has become a major determinant of programmes with fewer socially relevant programmes being produced, he pointed out. Satellite TV has increased in India providing programmes in more regional languages, more news channels highlighting sensation rather than depth.

Miss Natalie Goh of the Singapore Broadcasting Authority SBA said that the Singapore government continues to fund public service programmes to make available varied and quality programming for viewers. She noted that SBA encourages co-productions with foreign broadcasters as a means to strengthen the quality and range of programming.
Mr. Akiyoshi Kobayashi, President of NHK International, called for the use of new and relevant technology to compete and provide the public technically good programmes.

On the sustainability of PSB in the new media order, Mr. Syed Salahuddin Zaki, Director General of Bangladesh TV, said this is possible if policy makers adhere to democratic principles and allow electronic media to operate under such norms. He stressed that wielders of power should understand and respect media, but at the same time he proposed realistic regulations.

For his part, Mr. William Crawley from the University of Sussex, United Kingdom, emphasized that the important principle for the public service broadcaster is that the “free market does not in practice produce the variety and choice of programmes, that even its advocates expect. Intervention may be required to provide what the free market fails to provide.”

On whether broadcast regulations should be an instrument for change or control, Ms. Jocelyn Hay, chairperson of the Voice of the Listener & Viewer, England, said that public interest will best be served by enabling legislation that liberates where possible but when necessary also imposes positive programme requirements in regard to quality and range of programmes. He also called on PSBs to be more transparent, open and accountable in their dealings with the public.

On the same issue, Mr. Kamesh Sarma, a multi-awarded film-TV producer in India said that an enlightened regulatory body is necessary but one that imposes minimal rules and regulations. He pointed out that enlightened regulation must have a framework that accommodates the concerns of a pluralistic nation, encourages freedom of expression, accountability and professionalism, and ensures that merits are rewarded.

Mr. Syafiq Alfonse Abdullah of Radio Television Malaysia talked on new competencies and mindsets in a changing broadcast media environment. He called on PSBs to adapt to the fast-changing environment through life-long learning and be knowledgeable about IT and its impact.

To serve the public interest, it is necessary to ensure a level playing field for both state and private sector broadcasters with adequate regulations, according to Mr. Laxman Perera, Director-General of Sri Lanka Rupavahani Corporation, Sri Lanka. He recommended that PSBs must provide high quality programmes to keep the audience and its support, and promote cooperation between other broadcasters across borders to share programmes.

On balancing business and social responsibility goals in broadcasting, Dr. Binod Agrawal, Director of Taleem Research Foundation, India, pointed out that business interest has developed self-regulatory mechanism by which it is difficult to escape from certain social responsibilities towards audiences, communities and countries; that policy lags in the wake of technological advances have created a serious gulf between social responsibility and accountability of broadcasting companies; that there has been not much evidence to support the theory of cultural imperialism with the advent of foreign broadcasting in the region; that irresponsible broadcasting can be seen in the language used by private broadcasting companies and that film being the mother of both radio and television has defined the rules of broadcasting business and consequently given direction to their social responsibility.

Mr. Sireli Kini, CEO of Island Networks Corporation, Fiji discussed the difficulties small states in the Pacific confront to improve PSBs. They include among others the uncertain funding arrangement and neglect to upgrade or replace broadcasting equipment. He said that broadcasters have to market the importance of the public service role of broadcasting to their governments to be able to source more funds and support.

Ms. Tara Sinha, a respected advertising specialist in India, suggested creative strategies to improve TV programmes especially those directed towards the young. Among them, the production of sports programs for the young, tapping movie producers to make children programs and the creation of a task force composed of leading advertising agencies, film producers, and TV network executives to develop new programme concepts.
To improve TV programming for the young, Ms Moneeza Hashmi, General Manager of Pakistan Television Corporation, said PSBs must better understand the needs of audiences and respect younger audiences’ freedom of thought and expression, their youth and enthusiasm in planning for TV programmes.

A similar sentiment was expressed by Rene Villanueva, Creative Director of the Philippine Children’s TV Foundation by showing the video clips of winners in the Prix Jeunesse Festival. He said that the young can contribute to programme development, if we listen to their views on formats and contents, and involve them in actual production of programmes or segments.

Ms. Elizabeth Smith, CBA Secretary-General, talked about emerging models for public broadcasting and said her favored model includes a publicly-funded broadcaster plus competing broadcaster. Such publicly-funded broadcaster, she pointed out, should not report to the Ministry of Information or in the case of a commercial broadcaster receive their frequencies from such a ministry. This is best done by an independent regulator.

Ms. Esther Ker, Director of the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, India, noted that public television is increasingly becoming commercialized. For PSB to survive, she said its mandate has to be clearly defined, differentiated from the aims of private commercial television.

Towards the end of the three-day seminar, the participants generated a list of recommendations (see Appendix 1) to address the challenges and opportunities in Asia’s changing media environment. Among them, the exploration of non-advertising and non-government sources of funding for public service broadcasting, information sharing of financial management systems among the broadcasting stations, promotion of locally-made quality children’s programmes, encouragement of research to define and measure quality in programmes, development of web data bases, improvement of management skills through life-long learning, support for the establishment of citizens’ groups to monitor broadcasting and the development of audience feedback mechanisms.

The seminar was organized by AMIC in cooperation with the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association (CBA), EMPI Business School in New Delhi and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).