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Impact of Transnational Broadcasting on Regional Society and Culture

by

Enayatullah Khan
IMPACT OF TRANSNATIONAL BROADCASTING ON REGIONAL SOCIETY AND CULTURE

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- Broadcasting—radio or TV—itself is out of sync with the purpose it may fulfill in an impoverished region like South Asia. Both TV and radio set ownership and the actual content of broadcasting has done little to preserve national values and culture. This was true for much of the region. Principally it has been a propaganda machine for the government and the entertainment industry. Although state controlled it has served the Governments, be it in news or otherwise. This has driven many viewers to turn to TNC news which is relatively objective when it comes to political coverage because the national coverage is so distorted by censorship and official bias.

- This is despite the fact that most of the participants in the meeting were turned off by TNC broadcasting because they are patronizing, unclear, biased and in many cases ignorant of the actual situation. This is even after having local stringers and relates to news coverage of local events.

- As far as entertainment went there was consensus that TNC managed entertainment were sweeping the world and most were turning to it. It was also a matter of competition. Therefore could we afford to allocate resources to broadcast round the clock, songs, sports or whatever else?

- The impact is still on a small section of society. Most of the millions were too alienated from international cultural norms to recognize the attraction of alien cultural symbols. No peasant was about to get up and instead of planting rice switch on MTV. This is not to ignore the fact that reports say that nearly 5% of the Indian peasantry are already hooked on Dallas.

- Before we blame TNCs for what they are doing it is important to recognize what the national governments have not done. Whether it is in development or entertainment or information, do we believe the mass media to have been an enhancing force?
6. It is well known that in the sixties to the eighties, the western world opened up the markets to the East Asian economies but now are closing them just as the poorer parts of Asia are trying to surge ahead taking advantage of cheap labour. This is because the markets of the present West, beset by their own troubles, can no longer afford to be "generous" which they once claimed to be. Free trade which was considered the cornerstone of international capitalism has been replaced by global protectionism simultaneously with the fall of capitalism's greatest foe, ironic as it may be. In the world of changing sideshows the script is not dominated by the laws of economic and social morality but national or group self interest. Not even by the laws of ideology, whether capitalist or otherwise. This is true for the West as much as it is for us.

5. Had this been a matter only of transnational broadcasting we perhaps could have felt angry at the invasive West but the situation is no different when it comes to our own countries or the region. Here too we can't be called extremely concerned about moral values and the possible impact on society and culture products of mass media for mass consumption. While we are discussing the impact of transnational broadcasting, we are forgetting that a far greater impact was made on our society's value and culture by the video revolution of the last decade.

6. When video films hit the South Asian market all that was thought about was the cheap entertainment and high profit thus ignoring the fact that a handful of studio Dons of just one country was about to have a greater impact on South Asian society and culture than the social leaders of the era. Perhaps any famous Bombay film hero with a particular flamboyant life style is more recognizable and influential than the Great Mahatma in South Asia itself. Hindi movies with their violence and unbridled and crude sex till date has had a greater reach than any star waves till date. Yet the South Asia of the video film, unreal and unethical has not met with any resistance nor any stringent demand for guidelines in view of its impact, because it is the market demand amongst South Asians and profit for few which has decided its growth. Just as the market is deciding what will be beamed by the TNCs. I also wonder whether we would give up the opportunity and behave like the TNCs if we were given a chance to make profit and have such a strong influence on such a large region. Which country, now facing this TNC wave has displayed any socio-economic magnanimity towards its less fortunate neighbours whether across the region or a little far off. I hope I sound realistic rather than bellicose because I believe these to be facts.
7. When we discuss impact on the region we first have to agree what we mean by impact and region both and whether there is any consensus on the issue. Take for example South Asia, as a matter of example, can we agree that what is produced and carried across the region is subject to the same agreement on values? Can we ensure that producers in any of the countries will not create and then distribute through the mighty video network some kind of films which harms or damages regional value systems. If we are not subjecting ourselves to any kind of agreement within the SAARC, how realistic or even fair is it to ask the TNCs, who are bound together by nothing more glamorous than profit motive to leash their own channels?

8. I went through a lot of materials in preparation for this paper and in those what I have mostly came across are complaints of alien culture, youth and the uneducated being corrupted, distorted presentation of facts in the international news channels and so on. Quite frankly, I don’t know what to make of these words because I thought alien culture had arrived a long time before Star TV was invented and our youths surely hadn’t waited for MTV to become corrupt as they say. Facts about our life and politics had rarely been available to us through any of the national media in most of the countries which is another story by itself. Besides who are these people whose values are being challenged and who are jettisoning their traditions.

They are mostly my kids, your kids, our kids. In the dearth of any role models within the countries they are turning to fashion models and disc jockeys. People are hungry for meaning and entertainment and if they are not finding it in our airwaves, I feel they have the right to look for it wherever they may find it. If the songs and dances and soap operas are better in the dish antenna world, if TNCs offer a better option, the answer is not in censorship. Freedom is one tradition we would like to preserve. Or maybe grow.

9. As part of preparation, before coming to this conference I called my friends in media and development to a meeting on this subject so that I could have understanding of some sort of a common thread and my presentation would also have some collective input, not entirely dependent on my personal opinion. And this is what came through:

- That the impact is essentially or still one on a particular section of people. In Bangladesh which has roughly around 700,000 TV sets in a country of 1.10 million people plus, this is still a small change we are talking about. Its reach is much higher in India and even in Pakistan and they have a problem in proportion to set ownership. But basically it is a problem of the elite class. But of course, it is the elites who rule and it is important how their value system is developed.
10. There were a number of other issues which came up but the core feeling was distinct unhappiness about what is happening TNC wise as well as nationally. In other words, it seemed many believed that we really don't care enough about our own culture and taking that to all levels of society. Our response to TNCs are basically a result of fear over losing revenues and control over facts. Interestingly, few people expected the TNCs to behave responsibly or honourably because they were completely driven by the profit motive and had no loyalty to any people. Just like so many of the video movies that we get to see.

11. I am not being negative and I don't want to be jingoistic either. The consensus I felt at our meeting was that the issue went beyond broadcasting and delved into the realms of the concept of development, regions and the balance between a healthy balance sheet and minds in equilibrium.

12. Should we seriously think of impacts and doing something about it we must reach a consensus about the goals that we wish to reach as a region. To do that we have to recognise and credibilise a region by committing ourselves to corporate objectives to which we should be contributing. This can't work if we limit it to blanking out air waves. It has to incorporate the parameters of socio-economic objectives too. It has to make a region a valid concept which has some material footing instead of being another definition useful for just more talking.

13. The guidelines can be set if all the countries stand to benefit equally. Every country's lifestyle must be up for negotiation and that is the key message. Any formation of agreement must include conditions for improving the overall socio-economic status of the member countries. This issue is not ultravires to the subject because the first principle of any joint agreement is the opportunity to have access to become equal. Within the region, within Asia, the larger and economically stronger countries must recognise that guided development that took place and free market jump starting in other countries has and will bring them prosperity but stability will disappear unless there is reasonably uniform economic development as Europe is finding out much to its pain.

14. I would like to conclude by saying that the impact of TNC broadcasting doesn't exist in isolation. It is not a problem which can be met by regulatory laws or censorship. That stage is gone if it ever existed. It can be countered and channelised properly if that's what we are seeking by establishing a code of morality for all the countries who are affected and who believe in the common values of sharing and stability. And those countries who extend priority to meaningful support to their own cultural development before considering battling alien ones.
Are we concerned about culture because it has also meant losing air time revenue and control over is banned locally but heard internationally?

- Do we have a policy on what our approach should be towards regional culture and values and ways to energize them.

- Do we have the will and the resources to distribute broadcasting outlets equitably?