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

WELCOME REMARKS

By:

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Revision (not passed)

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

Address by Mr. Vijay Menon, Secretary-General, AMIC, Singapore

It gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you to this seminar on "Media Proliferation: How Can Broadcasters Best Serve the Public Interest?".

It was exactly fifteen months ago that we held a similar meeting in Singapore on the subject of public service broadcasting, jointly with the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association. That was a successful seminar and we are glad to be in Delhi today with the CBA as our partner to discuss this important issue. We would also like to acknowledge the valuable support extended to us by our local partner organization, EMPI Business School.

The theme of our seminar is most timely. The role of public broadcasting in an age of media proliferation is being debated across the world. The issues identified and the apprehensions and solutions voiced will, I am sure, surface at our meeting also. But we need to go beyond debate to a consideration of initiatives and action.

About two years ago at a symposium in Tokyo, it was pointed out that the promise of the digital age is one of greater abundance: abundance of channels and stations, of services and opportunities. The question is: what is the justification for continuing to support public service broadcasting either by a licence fee or some other form of regulation? In short, why can't it be left to the market.

Karol Jakubowics, Head of Strategic Planning, Polish Television, doubts that the market will take care of the needs of all groups in the population. At a meeting in Paris last month, he referred to the spate of acquisitions and mergers in the United States and said, 'There is a lot to the claim that the pure market model produces freedom for the owners, denying freedom to the disadvantaged individuals, groups and segments of society which cannot afford to establish their own media, and do not constitute an attractive advertising market for some one else to establish media catering to their needs'.

There are those who see the need for widespread public policy measures in the media market place. John Keane, the English sociologist, advocates public policy measures to create a genuine variety of media. In his view, public policy should aim to break down monopolies and popularize the view that the media of communication are a public good, not a private commodity whose primary function is to produce and circulate corporate speech for profit. He has proposed the establishment of media enterprise boards to fund alternative ownership of the divested media, and to support and subsidize public access to the media, and of media access to the market, by use of public funds.

The counter to this, voiced by Jakubowics, is that media pluralism cannot be promoted by public policy measures alone. That would mean giving the State too much power over the media, the risk of placing radio, television and the newspapers under political or administrative control. The answer possibly lies in the adoption of a market-cum-public policy model.

In Europe, for instance, the fundamental feature of the public policy model in the area of broadcasting, is the preservation of the dual system, combining commercial stations with legally mandated and protected public service broadcasting.

From Australia comes news of the setting up of a commission to hold a public inquiry into broadcasting. The inquiry is about advising the government on practical courses of action to improve competition, efficiency and the interests of consumers in broadcasting services. A guiding factor will be the Competition Principles of Agreement which specifies that any legislation which restricts competition should be retained only if the benefits to the community as a whole outweigh the costs and if the objectives can be met only through restricting competition.

Thus, whether we look East or West, there is a vigorous on-going debate concerning media proliferation and the role of public service broadcasting. It is appropriate that we should be holding this meeting in Delhi where the debate has been long, sometimes heated, but sadly inconclusive.

At this meeting we have over a dozen countries, providing a rich tapestry of sizes and systems skills, knowledge and experience. I hope that vigour of our discussions will reflect the variety of the participants.

For the benefit of those unfamiliar with AMIC, I would like to mention that we are a non-profit organization, a registered charity in Singapore, dedicated to the promotion of media and information activities in the region. Our founding in 1971, and our progress in the past 28 years, have been aided by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung of Germany and the Government of Singapore.

We are grateful to all of you ladies and gentlemen, speakers and delegates, for joining us at this important meeting. Your presence and active participation will ensure the success of this seminar.

Finally, I would like to express our sincere thanks to the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Sida as it is better known, for the support that it has extended to us in organizing our series of seminars on public service broadcasting. Our meeting in Singapore last year was supported by Sida. It has also extended its generous support to this meeting in New Delhi. Public Service Broadcasting is a topic of global concern and Sida's support has enabled us to discuss issues affecting the region.

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