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Country Paper -
Socio Economic Impact Of Broadcast Satellite

By

Malee Boonsiripunth
COUNTRY PAPER
SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT
OF BROADCAST SATELLITES

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SEMINAR ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF
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IMPACT OF BROADCASTING SATELLITES ON TRADITIONAL VALUES IN THAILAND

Introduction

An extensive development of communication technologies obviously creates a phenomenon of global information society. As members of the same society, third world can not isolate themselves but inevitably rely on western technologies at all time. Due to the lack of their own skillful manpowers, they have to depend on both imported technologies and broadcasting programmes. Both are unavoidable channels of transferring western values to third world social life.

Broadcasting technologies have been successfully developed along the line of technological progress. The advantage of radio and television broadcasting is obvious in developing nations where literacy rate is the major problem. According to many researchers, broadcasting is the most effective means for national development. It motivates national consciousness, helps overcome problem of illiteracy, and minimizes socio-economic gaps, at least when receiving the same programmes. Thus "broadcasting is the great leveller, going without discrimination into the homes of rich and poor, young and old.... no admission fee is required to enter TV-land.... The Age of broadcasting, then is a fitting climax to the history of a nation whose birth-certificate proclaimed that 'all men are created equal' and which has aimed to bring everything to everybody." (Boorstin, 1978:20)

Many research findings confirm tremendous impact of broadcasting, particularly, television programmes, on viewers. It is an excellent media in conveying behaviors, perceptions, attitudes, values and psychological needs. Because it brings all kinds of programmes into your homes, at least, 10 hours a day in case of Thailand. Granted with technological capacities to unite viewers all over the world, and granted with more time to serve the people, drive television to become the most important media in reflecting popular culture. Through broadcast media, the old barrier of classes, traditional taste, and the strictly social ties are minimized. It dissolves all cultural distinctions.

By technological virtuousness, broadcasting satellites allow people to access various information resources as well as serious social systems. Certainly, satellite
Communication has brought the world's diverse cultures into our living rooms. Now, the question is whether satellites are merely merit to national development effort. And when national identity is concerned, how third world cope with the change in a new global information society, specifically, the worry of cultural domination from the west.

**Satellite Communication in Thailand**

Satellite communications was first introduced to Thailand with the purpose of broadcasting television programmes from capital city to remote areas. The first domestic communications satellite was inaugurated in 1979, by leasing a transponder of the Indonesian satellite, PALAPA. Bangkok Broadcasting Television and Radio Company Limited (BBTV), TV Channel 7, under the franchise of the Royal Thai Army, took the lead to make possible nationwide coverage. A transponder of PALAPA was leased to distribute its colour Television programmes from Bangkok to T.V. rebroadcasting stations in selected areas throughout the country. BBTV also provides satellite communications facilities to the Army Television Broadcasting Station, TV Channel 5, from Bangkok to its substations in provinces. The satellite also facilitates to FM SCPC radio transmission.

Presently, BBTV operates 21 earth stations with antenna diameters ranging from 7.5 m - 11 m. They comprise of 1 master station for 2 TV programmes transmission (one for BBTV and another for the Army Television Broadcasting Station), 19 TVRO earth stations, and 1 mobile station.

In addition to television broadcasting services, the satellite provides facilities for public telecommunication services, government telecommunication networks and domestic data communications services.

Besides PALAPA's transponder leasing, the Communication Authority of Thailand (CAT), a state-owned enterprise, currently leases 1 transponder of INTELSAT Satellite for the simultaneous transmissions of 2 colour TV programmes and 480 preassigned FM SCPC.

CAT provides 2 TV distribution services for the Mass Communication Organization of Thailand (MCOT), TV Channel 9, and for the Bangkok Entertainment Company Limited, TV Channel 3, operating TV broadcasting under the franchise of
MCOT. Moreover, the use of FM SCPC transmissions also cover various communications services. Those are voice, teletype, facsimile and data in CAT business and offers the leased channels to meet its clients' needs.

The CAT domestic satellite communications currently consists of 31 earth stations. The antenna sizes are ranging from 6 m - 11 m: 1 master earth station for 2 TV programmes and SCPC transmissions, 6 for TVRO earth stations, 1 transportable earth station, and 1 offshore terminal on a natural gas platform in the Gulf of Thailand.

Briefly, satellite communications in Thailand was utilized to meet the need of information distribution to disadvantage areas in the country. Eventhough the first initiation was aimed to entertainment business they also served the needs of country’s development as well. Since the country is heading to the stage of New Industrialized Countries (NICs), domestic satellite communications will play essential role in supporting socio-economic development in Thailand.

Broadcasting Satellite and Traditional Values

The preceding section shows that direct broadcasting satellite does not yet introduce to Thailand at present. A number of broadcast programmes imported from developed nations and broadcast through domestic satellite systems or from its mother stations. Through satellite technology, those programmes are able to widely distributed.

The same as its neighbor nations, Thailand has experienced both advantages and disadvantages of advanced communication technologies. While domestic satellites give great benefits politically, economically and sociologically to national development projects, the country has accordingly faced the problem of socio-cultural penetration. Broadcasting satellites would have brought about new pattern of life style into metropolitan cities, whereas in the very remote areas are still needed to be developed. Socio-economic gap occurred at the same time as cultural transfer and cultural imitation are widely spreaded into people everyday life. Therefore the subject of cultural domination has been the topic of discussion in Thailand as well as in other developing countries. Such the circumstances are surely the outcomes of free flow of information and it is a one - way flow from stronger and higher technological power nations to the inferior lands. It was true when an American professor once mentioned in his research proposal,
Intercultural Affairs: Shaping Global Realities, 'Americans do not seem to know very much about the rest of the world, culturally or otherwise'. (Starck, 1988)

Communication is culture and culture is in communication. The two elements are inseparable. 'Culture' here is applied broadly to an anthropological sense to refer to a people's way of life. Edward T. Hall (1959) classifies ten separate kinds of human activity which he labels as "primary message systems".

It constitutes Interaction, Association, Subsistence, Bisexuality, Territoriality, Temporality, Learning, Play, Defense and Exploitation (use of materials). Each social has its identity of expressing their belief, attitudes, norms and traditional values through those human activities. Shortly, culture can be seen from traditional way of living and doing things.

Apart from geographical and economical similarity to other developing countries, Thailand is distinguished in its homogeneous society. The country has one major language, Thai, and one religion, Buddhism. Some scholars believe that because Thailand does not have a colonial experience, it has a unique political character and mass media system. (Boonlert, 1983)

Thai society has very strong cultural and traditional values. Hierarchically respect is one of the dominant social characteristics. Descendants are expected to pay respect to their precedents and their seniors (superiors). This value is rooted in almost every Thai individual. The respectation is expressed by gesture, posture and language usage. Most Thai people are usually impressed by their humble personalities. They also possess a unique expression of Sabai-Sabai-relaxing and 'take it easy' manner.

The country has a statistically high literacy rate. About 80 percent of population enrolls in primary school, yet only slightly over 4 percent complete a secondary cycle. This situation largely appears in remote rural areas. One third of the people earns less than $300 per household monthly. (Boonlert, 1983) This shows why radio and television broadcasting become very popular among Thai people.

Considering the media exposure habits, with about 400 radio stations make it possible to operate around the clock.
Radio broadcasting in Thailand. Television averagely, broadcast about 8-10 hours a day. People tend to spend more time on TV programmes than radio listening. However, it could be estimated that Thai people expose to radio and television programmes approximately 2-3 hours a day, and 3-5 hours a day respectively. Customarily, younger generations and children obtain higher potential in TV viewing than adults.

According to a survey conducted by the National Statistical Office, radio and TV programmes were classified into three categories; News, Feature and Entertainment. The survey in 1979 and in some years later indicate similar results. News is the highest popularity followed by entertainment and feature. For cultural consideration, it is appropriate to mention entertainment category here. The popular entertaining programmes are recorded music, Thai classical and popular, concerts, folk music and song, western classical and popular. Drama also constitutes a large part of this category. As for television, Thai and foreign films have a big share of the broadcast time.

It is interesting to note that traditional Thai forms of entertainment are among the highest percentage. As previously stated, this may due to the country is rich in culture and traditional values. And a big portion of Thai people live in rural areas where strong traditional activities are still going on practicing. It is also observable that some traditional cultural forms have been wisely integrated with modern media.

Nonetheless, cultural programmes from foreign countries are easily observed across various media as well. Most of them become favorite to Thai teenagers and found to be very influential to their behaviors and thinkings. These changing behaviors and tastes of mass receivers simultaneously reflect in the potential of imitation and adaptation of foreign programmes either by the forms of presentation or content translation. As Alan Hancock notices:

"In Thailand, the problem is not the wholesale transfer of a Western (radio) model, as part of a dependency process. It is rather the casual transfer, the result of a lassiefair attitude, of assorted elements of the Western model". (Hancock 1982 : 17)

Besides the direct imported programmes, there are also attempts to produce local programmes in Thai formats as well.
as integrate local development and cultural contents into modern forms of presentation. Despite the efforts to put traditional values in mass media, they are not significantly achieved due to the limitation of new technologies to catch the mood and the essence of traditional values. Boonlert concludes:

"Based on an analysis of broadcasting programme contents, it was found that, while a lot of traditional materials are incorporated into media schedules, a great deal of broadcasting programmes are imported from abroad especially, western countries. This has generated a major concern for the imbalance of cultural flows among nations. It is apparent that, along with most developing nations in the world, Thailand suffers from all the crucial imbalances; it has always been on the receiving end of the international information flow. With the widespread presence of transnational information and cultural materials, especially those shown on the cinema and television, it is difficult to deny that the cultural integrity of the Thai people is at stake". (Boonlert 1983:397)

Thai culture has been strongly affected by the two vital information channels; the transnational advertising industries and the transfer of communication technologies. Regarding to the application of direct broadcasting satellite system (if it is feasible to have one), it is possible that the people's way of life will be largely affected because of the unlimited broadcasting boundary. Essentially, it would create wider socio-economic gap between the rich and the poor. Economic power will be a major condition for receiving information from satellite. Being able to install a receiving antenna the rich have far more opportunities to get all kinds of information that the poor will never have a chance to get it. Thus, wider economic gap and the right to access to information will be largely affected.

In Thailand, the imported programmes and transnational advertising industries do transfer western ideology and culture to the receivers. For instance; economic and political benefits are the main objectives of western media culture. Commercialized media system has been strongly influenced Thai media and industrial enterprises. Economic motivation may not be an intentionally factor of cultural impact but it inevitably initiates cultural development to the people in some ways.
Broadly speaking, the impact of communication technologies on Thai culture can be mentioned in two domains, in remote rural provinces and in metropolitan Bangkok and in other big cities.

The rural Thais frequently absorb alien culture from the programmes broadcasted from the center. People have tendency to leave their land and are looking for 'better living' in big cities, as they have seen in television and cinema. Urban migration is one of the big problems in Bangkok as well as in some other big cities. Pattern of consumption is changing, luxurious products, such as television sets, refrigerators, gas stoves, jeans, T-shirts and a 'pick up' are increasingly considered as products of basic requirements of local people. They can be implied as symbols of social class. Young generation loves to follow the dressing style like a favorite popular stars in TV programmes so they can 'looked urbanized'. A type of cultural development in metropolitan Bangkok is persuasively communicated and transfer to rural people whether it is intended or not.

The great impact is vastly evident in Bangkok and other big cities. All channels of information flows are concentrated in Bangkok. Comparing to people in provinces, western impact is far more greater. The expression of "Bangkok is not Thailand" is still applicable to explain the difference between Bangkok metropolitan and remote territories.

Bangkok has been known as a very westernized city. The way of living, life style, dressing, consuming, and thinking are more or less the outcomes of media impact. Thais today prefer living in a western life style with Thai cultural contexts to purely traditional life style. They found that a lot of western facilities are more convenience and appropriated to working conditions than traditional ones.

Transnational advertising industries and communication technologies transfer serve primarily to economic interests have highly affected norms and behaviors of Thai people as a whole. Certain behaviors are apparently results of advertising channel, ie; the western values of consumption. "Coke" has brought different value of drinking to people. They always think of 'Coke' as a symbol of thirsty rather than a cup of water as in the past. A lot of people drink 'Coke' because it is a fashion and 'it is the drink of the superstar'. McDonald, Kentucky Fried Chicken, etc. create new culture of eating to young generations as well.
Raising satellite broadcasting case of the World Football Match 1990. It was found that during the one-month broadcasting, the night entertaining business has lost their income estimated about 100 million bahts. This could roughly explain the pattern of Thai people's consumption nowadays. Western values are synthesized into Thai traditional way of life evidently.

However, it could be optimistic that Thai people always have their unique characteristics of adapting themselves in certain situations. They always create their own ways of adapting and integrating different forms of culture together which most of the time it looked "good" in Thai way. It also worth mentioning that a lot of efforts have been gradually pressured in to stimulate culture identity and conserved traditional values of cultural heritages.

This author would, however, accept that in high technological global society, Thailand has been affected by the development of world economy. As far as national identity is concerned, Thailand has begun to aware of the strong invasion of cultural flow from other end. The imitation of western culture are more in terms of format rather than the 'wholesale' ideological imported. Therefore, the integration of old and new media, western forms and local contents are easily found in Thai broadcasting programmes.

By Way of Conclusion

The expansion of communication technologies in past few decades creates a growing consciousness of the speedy flow of information. It results in the changing patterns of life, social norms, behaviors and cultural values in every part of the world. This brings to many serious discussions concerning the need for protecting cultural domination through mass communication channels in most developing countries. Satellite broadcasting systems reach the level of sophistication that make control and censorship extremely difficult or impossible to people, because its capacities to move without limited boundaries. The national traditional values and cultural integrity are surely unavoidable affected. As members of this global world, third world countries cannot simply put away communication technology existence but to aware of technological dilemma.
Since we cannot deny and escape from technologies in nowadays life, we have to accept that communication technologies are to be beneficial to the people as well. It is apparent that the impact of communication technologies, broadcasting satellites, on traditional values are in every receiving end, and the issue will remain a subject of controversy.

It is this author's position that, although a large portion of communication technologies in the third world are utilized for commercial benefits despite the pouring of cultural flow, developing countries should organize possible cooperation among them, both nationally and internationally to concentrate on the issue in particular. It is necessary to initiate a working link between involved sectors vertically and horizontally; government, media organizations, practitioners and the public to examine the problem and find ways of solution as well as protection. Self-control or self-censorship of concerned parties, particularly practitioners should help in the light of selecting appropriate programmes for broadcasting.

Moreover, a comprehensive set of communication policies and planning must be developed in order to motivate a systematical use of such technologies and thus possible guideline to protect cultural domination. As it seemed never ending of technological expansion, proper integration and association between traditional media and modern media forms are appropriate in such a changing world. Thus, a well formulated communication planning is needed.

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