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Seminar on the "Impact of the Changing Media Environment on Public Service Programming in Asia"

The Impact of Transnational Broadcasting on Public Service Programming

The arrival of Cable and Satellite in Malaysia was expected but the sudden introduction was a surprise. The sky was not expected to be open so early as the legislation has yet to be promulgated, just as when the first private commercial station went on the air.

What is clear at the moment the Censorship Law is quite dominant.

The public service programmers are more committed to get the audience in their programmes, discussing issues that touch their daily life, informing them of happenings around them (events, weather, traffics etc). Specialising programmes for the children, teenagers, school-leavers, those in colleges, the ladies, as well as continuing to improve the local entertainment and dramas in their own language, which the Cable and the Satellite stations find hard to match as long as they remain western oriented in their programming.
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The Impact of Transnational Broadcasting on Public Service Programming

Scenario

Television was introduced in Malaysia 32 years back in 1963, 27 years after radio was officially organised and launched in 1946. With the introduction of a private station last year, the radio air-wave is basically dominated by the state-owned public broadcaster in name of the Department of Broadcasting, better known as Radio-Television Malaysia (R.T.M.).

State monopoly of broadcasting in Malaysia ended 11 years ago. There were ripples when the first private television operator (TV3) began their operation alongside the then two established public channels (TV1 and TV2) which at that time were regarded as being too "sedentary" in their operation and was said to be heavily "propagandistic" in their broadcasts' contents. The introduction of a private commercial station was significant as it was in line with the state's privatisation policy. In not wanting to corporatised or privatised the existing network under its wing the best alternative was to allow the private sector to operate a new network.

Both the public radio and television networks were already airing commercials when the private stations came on the air as there were demands for it. It must be noted too that all the broadcasts were transmitted nation-wide either via micro-waves and/or satellites.

Early this year the second private television channel (TV4/Metro Vision) came into the scene concentrating in the urban Capital City area of Klang Valley.

Early this month Cable Television (Mega TV) came to the country also concentrating in the urban sectors of the nation. Though "cable" in name, it seems the propagation could only be receive via a "decoder" free to air.
Towards year's end (December 20, 1995) the country will see its first satellite MEASAT-1 being launched and the beginning of satellite transmission "direct to home".

Of significance the Cable and the satellite operators seems to be mainly rebroadcasting satellite programmes with a mixture of local fares. The concentration would be on the so-called "niche" programming in term of news, music, film, sports and documentaries from established source internationally.

Regulators

All broadcasting materials came under the purview of the allmighty Censorship Board as stipulated by the Censorship Act, and in accordance with the Broadcasting Act.

As broadcasting was the sole monopoly of the Broadcasting Department under the Ministry of Information prior to the introduction of the private stations, not much thought was given into the finer aspects of the law. The normal General Order applied to all civil service as well as the smattering guidelines and code of conducts was thought to be good enough to operate a broadcasting station then. In existence was the licensing division of the Ministry of Information whose enforcement role then was only to collect revenue under the term of licence to receive radio and television signals.

When the first privately owned TV station went on the air in 1984 the Broadcasting Act was not in existence. Their operating licence was issued by the Minister of Work, Post and Telecommunications in accordance with the Telecommunication Act. It was a very simple one page document with no frills. Then the situation changed. In view of strong demand for more private stations, it was strongly felt that a more specialised way of regulating broadcasts was needed. The Minister of Information was given that unwielding power under the Broadcasting Act legislated in 1988. To strengthen his position the Minister was given the power to issue operating licence.
Shortcomings seems to prevail in the Broadcasting Act as well as the Telecommunication Act in term of enforcement especially with the impending open sky policy when MEASAT-1 is launched.

Legislation on receiving satellite signals has been conspicuously vague in Malaysia. The Telecommunication Act was not fully enforced to a large extent in the state of Sabah and Sarawak as there seems to be a breach on it to a certain extent with the profusion of parabolas (TVRO) there. The Broadcasting Act empowers the Minister of Information the issuance of licence to receive signal beside the operating licence and oversee the contents of broadcasts locally.

The importation and sales of materials came under the Custom Act which to large extent has been effective as a deterring factor in the importation of gadgets instrumental in receiving satellite signals.

In line with the Broadcasting Act the Ministry of Information has been formulating regulations and codes to regulate programmes aired.

The market is still small and well within control. It is no surprise that the medias, the regulators and the legislators were able to exist in harmony as there was still the need for each other. The future will be enormously different depending on the market.

Commercials and Programming

The launching of the private station, heralded a change in the programming style of the two already established public channels who were already airing commercials. Surprisingly the arrival of the new comers did not affect the demand for commercial times over both networks. With changing marketing strategy both networks in fact increased their commercial income annually. The divide of the advertising cake were shared equally by the three networks. This was mainly due to the increased in advertising budgets of the advertisers, the buoyancy of the country's economy and perhaps the affluence of the time.
The initial thought that television was synonymous with western programmes was proven to be incorrect. The initial thought was propagated by the medias which subscribed to the western oriented agencies at that time. The audience were tired of programmes alien to them in term of social norms and more so in the language used. By and by local programmes began to be appreciated, and there were demand for local products, as well as the need to propagate local music, arts, culture, dramas, documentaries and magazines. Though the dominant dailies in English keep on glorifying the state of the art of the imported programmes, the three networks were bent on airing locally produced programmes at "prime time. The broadcasters knew best the taste of the audience. They were receptive to the language they understand and used daily.

Situation

Under heavy criticism from the national dailies together with the literary and language circles, R.T.M. in concurrence with the Ministry of Information forged a policy of privatisation of programmes, mainly in the field of dramas, ultimately with the aim of reviving the ailing film industry, in the form of videos some 15 years back. In existence at that time were a handful of production houses heavily fortified by expatriates specialising in commercials.

The pick-up was rather sluggish but the support of the audience were tremendous. Initially amateurs in every respect today almost all the top flight programmes over the three networks were locals. Those involved in the film industry during its boom period were coming out of retirement in droves to the new opportunity. Strangers to the industry, if its qualified to be called so, were getting involved and a few got their pockets burned.

The banks were making funds available at competitive rates. With more channels available the industry is well and very much pulsating.
To a certain extent this has assisted in the development of the broadcasting industry as more professionals were made available in the market alongside the ones churned out by the Communication Schools.

With that experience perhaps the introduction of the second commercial television channel some months back in the capital area (Kuala Lumpur) of the Klang Valley did not caused panic among the three existing networks. This was highlighted by the confidence of the first private television operators venturing into the Cable TV business immediately after the launching of the second private channel

Legislation.

Already on hand is the Media Policy which was initiated with the concurrence of the media practitioners. The media practitioners were quite aware of defending national interests when the country was wrongly described elsewhere.

Realising the need to improve the existing laws in order to regulate the "broadcasters of the future" a comprehensive Act dealing with the subject is about to be tabled in Parliament. Of course, the existing laws, codes, and guidelines would be streamlined to suit the changing environment.

Malaysia is looking far and wide on the development and experience of the other countries, more so among those with wider experiences.

Being a multiracial, multicultural and multi-religious country did not make it much easier for the policy-makers in their commitment to meet the vision of the country. The broadcasting media was regarded as very effective as instrument to nation building. The media practitioners concur with the fact by assisting in the formulation of the laws and codes.
Privatisation

Privatisation is one of the top agenda in the country. Not a day went by when the subject was not discussed. More and more state operated department and utilities were being privatised, be they the ones making money or not. The leadership has been on record that the state would not be financially burden by those organisation earmarked for privatisation. On the other side it was believed, and proven so, that those privatised organisations went about their business effectively and with a profit. With smaller budget the government only maintained the regulatory bodies, some of which were also earmarked to be privatised, and netted in on licencing and taxes as well as bonus on the profits of its shares in the companies.

When the government was not involved with its "golden shares" in the privatised operation at the initial stage, it was conditional for the companies to be on equities among a few conglomerates.

In broadcasting privatisation of programmes has created spin-offs such as manufacture of equipments, setting up of communication schools and production houses, beside creating talents in the field of music, acting, directing and anything related to the industry. With increased population privatisation should be the answer to the job seeking public. Therefore it is quite relevant to nation building in developing and growing country like Malaysia. It is look upon as business opportunities.

Programming

The licence indicated it was mandatory for the present operator to have a majority of its fare locally produced programmes with an objective of 80 percent local contents by the year 2000. Obviously the Cable and satellite operators would have a different set of rules.

The policy of purchasing local products from private production houses instituted locally has
boosted the industry tremendously in term of soft and hardwares. Theres even enthusiasm in the air that the forthcoming Commonwealth Games to held in Kuala Lumpur in 1988 would be covered with the assistance of the private sectors.

It was envisaged that there will be competition in acquiring local programmes between the terrestrial, cable and satellite operators. Here of course the Copyright Act would be quite prominent as a deterrent to "piracy".

The satellite operators has been eyeing the local programmes and possibly working on an understanding with the various parties involved in acquiring such programmes on first to air basis. Although working on limited budget the local fares involved high production costs. With their limited commercial airing as their income was supposed to be via suscriptions it would look hard on the satellite operators to compete with the already established terrestrial operators. With that uncertainties, the public and private sector was quite confident they will continue to dominate the local air-waves, more so with locally produced programmes.

Existing operators complied with airing programmes:
1. explaining government programmes and policies
2. using Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of broadcasts
3. of public service oriented
4. national religion and motivational in nature
5. produced by the local private production houses.

Properly regulated under their licence the private stations thrived harmoniously alongside the public broadcasters.

Thus via regulations the satellite operators have to act as "public broadcasters" of sort. The organisation has to instituted locally. The Censorship Board look set to play its role prominently via the delayed transmission system. How viable and practical remained to be seen.
Preparation

Bracing the imminent arrival of the Cables, Satellites and the Internets the public was made aware of the implications through the medias, including the dailies, with their special features and supplements. The broadcasters highlighted the necessities by tying up with the international agencies and broadcasters abroad in acquiring up to the minute visuals, including live events via satellites. At the same time the negative effects were not left out and the targets were the parents and guardians.

Again the onslaught of the satellite seems very much western oriented much related to the permissive and open society, regarded as the VHS-C elements (Violent, Horror, Sex and Counter-Culture). This come under the purview of the Censorship Board and various regulations and code of conducts.

What sort of receiving instruments to be used in getting the satellite signals as well as its frequencies has yet to be officially announced. The regulators are working out the best way to deal with the issues though there’s already talked of manufacturing the instruments locally.

The public broadcasters were reorienting their programme fares with more audience participation and programmes that touches the daily aspect and livelihood of the populace such as local happenings on a live basis. This personal touch on the ground would not easily be matched by the satellite in the sky who would be thinking more for the varied audience in various countries. As for the terrestrial broadcasters there’s even talk of interactive television.

What matters most is the languages used. The local audience would be most comfortable to hear and see familiar voices and features that exists around them daily. They feel more comfortable with programmes that they understand and can associate with. Furthermore, their daily chores especially those in the rural areas will not allow them to sit in front of the sets 24 hours a day.
In line with the informed society policy more news and current affairs programmes were envisaged as the main fares. Professionalism and quality is the essence. Inventions, scientific findings and researches institutionalised locally should be the highlight.

"Niche" broadcasting has been discussed at length. Though general viewing and family oriented fares seems to be in preference, the programmers were busy at creating belts to cater for the young (children), the teenagers, the school-leavers, the undergraduates, as well as for the ladies and the housewife. There's even talk of distance learning over the air in conjunction with the schools of higher learning.

The presence of commercials was viewed positively as it create self-sufficiency and profits to the private operators in financing its daily operation and programme productions. Well regulated commercials has been of great assistance in depicting nation-building and finer-side of business and the economies.

The country has been hard at work in ensuring family traditions being maintained. The young should be disciplined in the selection of programmes and not be allowed to control the knobs.

The business sectors and related parties were looking at the development as opportunities. The national corporations in this developing country is set to play its role alongside the administrators in moulding a visionary populace through the broadcasting medias by contributing to the programme production based on their success.

Properly instituted and guided the industry would be beneficial to the nation and the populace.

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