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The Social And Cultural Impact Of Satellite Broadcasting In Sri Lanka

by

Irwin Weekackody
PART ONE

A) Preamble

Whenever or wherever in the world a discussion centering on Satellite Broadcasting takes place, it is inevitable that the name of Dr. Arthur C. Clarke should figure prominently in such a parley. To attempt to talk about communications Satellites without any reference to Dr. Arthur C. Clarke, is very much like the effort to stage Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark.

In this context, Sri Lanka is in a privileged position of being the home of "The Prince of Denmark" - to continue the metaphor. Dr. Arthur C. Clarke, the father of the concept of Satellite Communication, is an honorary citizen of Sri Lanka. In a recent statement, though, Dr. Arthur C. Clarke assumes the status not of the father but that of the God Father of the Communications Satellite.

His original article in Wireless World, London in October 1945, spelt out in detail his theory that earth Satellites in high orbit could act as Communications Stations relaying telephone conversations, television signals, sound broadcasting and other messages, right round the globe, in a matter of seconds. The story of this initial presentation of the concept of Satellite Broadcasting has now passed into the region of the legend, going beyond history.
The high orbit of 22,300 miles (36,000 kilometers) at which Dr. Arthur C. Clarke declared that a Satellite will be geosynchronous and therefore geostationary, is now dubbed "Clarke - Orbit", in honour of his theory that paved the way for the present age of information. Dr. Arthur C. Clarke has devised a picturesque phrase to sum up the impact of Satellite Broadcasting. The shrinking of the globe through world-wide Satellite Broadcasting - Dr. Arthur C. Clarke said - has ushered in the era of the global family. In a further refinement of this phrase, Dr. Clarke characterizes today's global community as the "Telefamily"

What is visualised in this phrase is a close-knit global community, that is more intimately interlinked through world-wide communication than Mr. Marshall McLuhan's "Global Village".

This background will adequately explain the reason why this presentation began with a series of prefatory quotations from Dr. Arthur C. Clarke.

B) Early Bird and its Impact

The impact of the Communications Satellite is so intricately interwoven into the fabric of modern life, that it is a fairly challenging task to identify the various strands of influence of Satellite Broadcasting.
The variegated impacts that Satellite Broadcasting was eventually to register throughout the global community, became clearly evident in the slip-stream of the sensational Trans-Atlantic Transmissions of the Pioneering Satellite "Early Bird" (Later renamed Intelsat 1), which to all intents and purposes, is considered the first Communication Satellite of significance. It was launched from Cape Kennedy on the Sixth of April 1965.
PART TWO

SR LANKA AND SATELLITE BROADCASTING

A) History

Communications - Sage Marshall McLuhan declared several decades ago that "A Global Village" was in the offing. What he implied by this telling phrase was the coming into being of a borderless world, in which media of Communication would transcend national boundaries. Said Marshall McLuhan "Ours is a brand new world of all - at-oneness". "Time" has ceased. "Space" has vanished. We now live in a world of simultaneous happening.

History of Sri Lanka's entry into this "World of Borderless Communication" is a significant area of the impact of Satellite Broadcasting in Sri Lanka, as history too is fused invariably into the element of impact.

History of Satellite Broadcasting in Sri Lanka began with the installing of a dish-antenna on the roof of Dr. Arthur C. Clarke's residence in Colombo, early in 1977. This dramatic introduction of Satellite Broadcasting to Sri Lanka can be best monumented with the inimitable words of Dr. Arthur C. Clarke himself.

"Early in 1977, a team of Indian Engineers flew into Colombo and installed a massive five-metre dish the generous gift of ISRO - the Indian Space Research Organisation - on my roof. When SITE (Satellite Instruction Television Experiment), came in loud and clear, TV had arrived for the first time in Sri Lanka, and everyone from the President down, came to watch the programme; My liquor bill was enormous".

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The State set up a ground station for Satellite Communication at Padukka, sixteen miles from Colombo on the fifth of May, 1976. In the early days of Sri Lanka's exposure to Satellite Broadcasting, the main facilities available through Communication Satellites were international telephone calls, radio signals and transmissions to and from news agencies. These travelled via Satellite through the ground station at Padukka.

The phase of Satellite Communications started in earnest in 1982, with the establishment of Sri Lanka's national Television Station - SLRC (Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation).

Prior to this too, some marginal public use was made of Television signals received via Satellite. In March 1981, when an unsuccessful assassination attempt was made on President Ronald Reagan of the United States, the television images of this act were recorded by Padukka ground station. ITN (Independent Television Network) a State sector television station which at that time broadcast a TV signal within a limited radius of the country, transmitted these images over its TV service. The enormous possibilities of Satellite Broadcasting, became evident as a by-product of this initiative. ITN, started out in 1979, as a private sector venture. After it was in operation for a couple of months, the State took it over and projected a limited radius-TV signal. This operation was administered as part of Sri Lanka's sound broadcasting set-up (SLBC - Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation). In the last decade, the use of Satellite Broadcasting has progressed at an accelerated pace.
Private sector organisations, especially five star hotels, acquired their own dish-antennas, to receive whatever international TV signals and entertainment they could, for the benefit of their clients; Embassies and Consulates have their own Communications Satellite systems.

Home TVRO (TV Receive Only) systems have begun to proliferate. There have been several instances in Sri Lanka, of Satellite Communications enthusiasts (In Dr. Arthur C. Clarke's description the lineal descendants of the 1920 - 30 radio hams) who put together rough-and-ready dish antennas generally constructed out of wire mesh used for hen coops.

Enterprising local individuals have begun to build more sophisticated dish-antennas on a commercial basis. Equally enterprising TV viewers, who could afford to acquire a more sophisticated dish-antenna, started their own cable-TV systems linking fee paying neighbours to their TVRO dish-antennas.

In 1983, when Television signals relayed through Communication Satellite, were still a rarity in Sri Lanka, Dr. Arthur C. Clarke was gifted three giant dish-antennas by Robert Cooper of the United States who launched a monthly magazine entitled "Satellite Digest". Of these three antennas, one was installed on the balcony of Dr. Arthur C. Clarke's house. The second was donated to the University of Moratuwa. The third, a twenty-five-foot giant was installed at Arthur C. Clarke Centre for Modern Technologies.
These have become landmarks in the history of Satellite Broadcasting in Sri Lanka. The dish-antenna at the Arthur C. Clarke Centre for Modern Technologies relayed CNN TV reports to the national TV Network, during the height of the Gulf War in 1991.

The history of Satellite Broadcasting entered yet another significant stage on the 21st of March 1983, when Sri Lanka's Television Station - SLRC began to receive the Asia Vision TV News File. The exchange of Television News in an Inter-Asian context tended invariably to strengthen a regional solidarity.

In the years 1991 and 1992, new developments occurred in the field of Satellite Broadcasting relating to Sri Lanka. ITN (Independent Television Network) expanded the foot-print of its signal and began to transmit almost island-wide.

Private sector entrepreneurs set up Television Operations in competition with the State sector TV establishments. Of these MTU (Not Musical Television but, Maharaja Television) is already functional. Another private sector television station is being planned. Currently, public and private sector television stations regularly telecast programmes relayed by BBC, CNN and Satellite Television Asia Region (STAR).
Worldnet - the Television arm of the USIS - is regularly received in Sri Lanka and its programmes are transmitted over Sri Lanka more or less frequently. Over and above these developments, significant teleconferencing facilities are available in Sri Lanka. The pioneering teleconferencing programme in Sri Lanka was recorded in December 1985, to mark three memorable events - namely the Fortieth Anniversary of the Communication Satellite concept, the twentieth year of the launching of Early Bird (INTALSAT 1) and Dr. Arthur C. Clarke's birthday. This teleconferencing event was held in a studio of the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation. Although we in Sri Lanka received both audio and visual signals from abroad, we were able to transmit only the audio signals of the teleconference. This way, we in Sri Lanka, have been able to make much headway during the relatively short period of seventeen years that have elapsed, since Satellite Broadcasting was first introduced to our country.

B) IMPACT OF SATELLITE BROADCASTING

Altered Perceptions

Over the years, the primary impact of Satellite Broadcasting in Sri Lanka, has been the altered perceptions of the masses of this country. Watching Television, the people began to feel a sense of community that they were able to experience only rarely, prior to the widespread use of Satellite Broadcasting.
The theoretical pronouncements about the shrinking globe and the emergence of a Telefamily embracing the whole earth, became a living, palpable truth when one could get in touch with friends and relatives, leaping across continents and oceans in a matter of seconds. The International telephone call, the Telex message, the Faxed letter, that miraculously knitted up time and space, altered the conventional ways of perceiving the globe.

To the Sri Lankan migrant worker, employed in some sector in the Middle East, home is only seconds away, when he or she has access to a phone with IDD facilities. The caller may not be aware that the voices of the sender and the receiver have been instantaneously linked together by an unsleeping "TalkingStar" up there in space.

Those Sri Lankans in Singapore when armed with the phonecard can travel to the bosom of their families, transported with amazing alacrity by the signal that the Communications Satellites are ever ready to transmit across space.

The changed preceptions of the world and one's own place in it, came about emphatically due to the images that appear on TV screens.

The performance of the Sri Lankan Cricket team abroad is watched with enthusiasm and a touch of patriotic ardour by TV viewers. That they are playing thousands of miles away is easily forgotten because of the vividness and the surprising detail of the images. The all-at-onceness referred to by Marshall McLuhan, is now a living reality.
The affluent book-makers of Colombo have added another dimension to this altered preceptions. Their clients gathering round a TV monitor can see for themselves, the fateful run of their favourite "animals" either fulfilling their hopes or frustrating their expectations. The defeat or the victory of the punter turns out to be a visual reality. Satellite Broadcasting alters the preceptions even of a Sri Lankan villager, making him a citizen of the world, though he may not know anything very much about it.

ii. Impact on News and its consumption

In the era, prior to the Communications Satellite, news was largely something that happened. This definition is now drastically revised to read "news is something that is in the process of happening right before our eyes".

In Sri Lanka, this revised attitude to news, was strengthened during the Gulf War in 1991.

Cable News Network (CNN) elaborated this new meaning of news, when this first global TV News Company gave an account of the Gulf War live, twenty-four hours a day.

In Sri Lanka, as much as in other countries of the world, the CNN man in Baghdad turned out to be a household presence. Peter Arnett, CNN's man on the spot in the embattled capital of Iraq, was elevated to the stature of media hero.
In Sri Lanka, the CNN TV news-file on the Gulf War was not exactly live as it was recorded live and telecast for Sri Lankan viewers after a time lag of about 2 hours. But, still the impression of instantaneous happening was very much present in this news telecast.

The avidity with which Sri Lankan TV news watchers, talked about CNN News proved beyond doubt that TV news via Communications Satellite was, thought of, not merely as news, but as an active participation in events that were taking place in various parts of the world, while we looked on.

This new phenomenon of the unification of the world community through news broadcasts by the Communications Satellite, was very effectively put into words by William A. Henry III. His words "What CNN viewers have seen, is the awakening of a village consciousness, a sense that human beings are all connected and all in together wherever on the planet they may be. How else to explain Kenyans who lined up six-deep in front of electronic stores to watch footage of a war, they had no soldiers fighting in? The full potential of the medium, is just beginning to be realized. What we are seeing is not just the globalization of television, but also through television, the globalization of the globe".

These Sri Lankans who view with zest, the news that comes to their small screens via Satellite, are part of this globe's globalization through news from the skies - although they are not able to articulate it.
When Sri Lankans saw Bill Clinton swearing-in as the 42nd President of the United States of America, television news had brought in via Satellite, it was yet another event in the global village, strengthening the position of the Sri Lankan as a member of the world’s telefamily.

iii. Impact on Culture and Education

Satellite Broadcasting has dramatically influenced world culture and the indigenous styles of life. The greatest contribution of Satellite Communication to mankind today, is the dispelling of the isolation that certain groups and tribes experienced in the eras of conventional Communication. In some remote, isolated centres of human settlement, the loneliness felt by people who were not able to come to adequate terms with their state of living, totally apart, drove them into extreme distraction. In the American mid-west, it has been recorded, there were instances when farmers’ wives went mad through sheer loneliness. Quoting this situation, Dr. Arthur C. Clarke remarked in a recent paper that, today in a context of constant Satellite Broadcasting these wives, of course are more likely to go mad through too much music television.

The dispelling of the cultural isolation of people, proves to be a blessing of no mean order, when we consider the disasters that have overcome the people of SAHEL BELT, who have been condemned to starvation, malnutrition, disease and death. Millions in Ethiopia and Somalia, would have died unknown to the outside world, had it not been for Satellite Communication. Their plight was projected right round the globe into drawing rooms and offices, shocking the viewers into an urgent state of concern. International aid could be mobilized in consequence and forces could be mustered to counter this pitiful and senseless human suffering.
The culturally satisfying assurance of belonging, is strengthened by satellite Broadcasting which is in effect man speaking to man, night and day, right round the world. A mutual regard for what they are culturally, has been inculcated by Satellite Broadcasting that allows one culture to 'peep' into the other, through the electronic window provided by Satellite Broadcasting.

The hierarchical concept of cultures, which assumes that some ways of life are intrinsically superior to others, has begun to disappear due largely to the constant exposure of the global community to images that depict various communities of man at work, at play, and even, at times, at war; Satellite Broadcasting has, as another by-product of its non-stop stream of world-wide communication, assisted the emergence of a global culture—a modern cosmopolitanism—that unifies communities in a more-or-less identical style of life. The potential Satellite Communication possesses to compel emulation of styles of culture behaviour, is quite impressive.

Subtle cultural trends achieve trans-border passage via Satellite, transforming life styles through their cumulative effect. In Sri Lanka such cross-cultural influences seem to affect the young much more than adults.
Almost all Satellite Broadcasts have an educational component. This could be either direct or oblique - concealed or open. In the very first Trans-Atlantic transmission by Early Bird (INTALSAT 1), an item of the programme was the performance of a heart operation by the world-famous heart surgeon Dr. De Bakey. In European Medical Colleges, students watched him doing the surgery, over his shoulder as it were. In remote areas of the earth where there is a dearth of teachers, the instructions arrive in the classroom via Satellite. Satellite Broadcasting has substantially expanded the concept of education to include generations of adults as well.

The land-mark mass educational effort by Satellite was the SITE (Satellite Instruction Television Experement) of India. Four thousand backward villages were selected as the target area. Via Satellite A-T-S-6 (Applied Technology Satellite 6) programmes were beamed to these villages as the rural folk gathered around the village TV monitors. The areas in which they were instructed were farming and other agricultural systems, family planning process and public health. These SITE programmes were received in Sri Lanka as well.

Today, a staple tool in distance education is Satellite Broadcasting.

iv. Issues relating to the impact of Satellite Broadcasting

In Sri Lanka, a primary issue relating to Satellite Broadcasting is time allocation for international News Network programmes received via Satellite.
Rupavahini - the main State-Sector Television Station - telecasts news programmes from CNN. Generally speaking, no arrangement has been made to telecast these live - but on special occasions - say when our teams play cricket abroad - the event is telecast live. The only private sector TV Station in Sri Lanka - MTV - has an arrangement to telecast BBC news received via STAR.

A knotty ethical issue, that is likely to grow in complexity as technologies advance, is the Satellite Broadcast programmes received via Satellite direct on the home TV screen.

When major TV Stations derive programming via Satellite, the State still has a control over their ethical implications for local audiences. The State can determine the terms under which these could be used for public broadcasting.

But, when programmes are received at home via Satellite Broadcasting, not even a modicum of control could be exerted either by the State or by any other controlling body. In the years to come, when "TV receive only" antennas proliferate, as they get progressively miniaturized and relatively inexpensive, the ethical issue is likely to be redundant. The consumer will be as free to use these programmes as Sound Broadcasting Programmes received via Satellite. At this stage we can only ask "Is this an ideal development?"
PART THREE

The Future

The age of Satellite Broadcasting will be fifty-five years, at the turn of the century if we included the twenty years between the idea and its first execution.

In the remainder seven years of this century what could be the possible scenario for us here in Sri Lanka? One could visualise a Satellite Broadcasting future for Sri Lanka in which Sri Lanka will have its own Communications Satellite - just as India, Indonesia to name only two Asian nations, who have their own Communication Satellites. With the God Father of the Communications Satellite, Dr. Arthur C. Clarke an honorary citizen of Sri Lanka, this does not in any way, seem an unattainable future scenario.

If we had our own Communication Satellite, vigorous provincial journalism could very well become a reality. And those areas of Sri Lanka that are in the leeward side of the central hills and are consequently in the TV shadow, could have the TV signal beamed to them by Satellite. Greater national and cultural integration and a considerable saving of expenditure in ground-based communication infra-structure too, could be among the benefits that will accrue.
PART FOUR

Conclusion

Nature too, seems to have cast Sri Lanka in a privileged position with regard to Satellite Communication. Of all countries, it was Sri Lanka that was able to attract Dr. Arthur C. Clarke as an honoured permanent resident. Even Communication Satellites too, see in to be especially attracted to Sri Lankan. One can do no better than to conclude this paper allowing Dr. Arthur C. Clarke's own words to explain this seeming Communications Satellite miracle.

"Exhausted geostationary Satellites end up, milling round and round above Sri Lanka in a celestial Sargasso sea, when they run out of gas"

Thank You.
Direct Broadcasting by Satellite — A Brilliant Prediction

We are pleased to present to readers of *Wireless World* this special reprint of a remarkable article. In our October 1945 issue, Arthur C. Clarke, the engineer and science fiction author, put forward a completely new idea in broadcasting and communications: that transmitters could be carried on artificial satellites of the Earth and thereby achieve excellent coverage with low power very efficiently. This was 12 years before the first artificial satellite carrying a radio transmitter (Sputnik), 17 years before the first communications satellite (Telstar) and some 30 years before the first experimental broadcasting satellites.

What was remarkable about Clarke’s article was that it gave the exact conditions for putting a satellite into a geostationary orbit — in which the satellite revolves at the same rate as the Earth and so remains stationary over a given spot on the Earth’s surface. When the first geostationary satellites were actually launched in the mid 1960s they proved Clarke’s prediction to be absolutely correct. In recognition of this brilliant piece of theoretical work Clarke has received awards and honours from all over the world, not least from the leading scientists and engineers of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in the USA.

Over the years we have been continually asked for reprints of this article. What better time to issue one now, when it has just been announced that Britain is to have its own satellite broadcasting service? The Home Secretary has given his approval for an early start and the preparations are under way. During the 1980s the outline of Britain’s houses will begin to look different as dish type satellite receiving aerials sprout from their walls or roofs — a permanent reminder of Arthur Clarke’s outstanding contribution to radio engineering.

Tom Ivall
Editor, *Wireless World*