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Radio And Television In A National Crisis

By

Sarath Amunugama
RADIO AND TELEVISION IN A NATIONAL CRISIS: CREDIBILITY AND GOVERNMENT MANAGEMENT

SARATH AMUNUGAMA

In the summer of 1985, at the height of what journalists call ‘the silly season’, the Sunday Times was looking for a good front page story. He got a ‘tip’ from a BBC staffer. The ‘tip’ was that a forthcoming programme on BBC’s ‘Real Lives’ documentary series would carry interviews with IRA and Unionist leaders, who had publicity advocated the killing of their political opponents.

Since this was hardly news, the IRA and Unionist hardline terrorist positions being well known in the UK, Penrose persuaded a Sunday Times colleague, to put a question to Margaret Thatcher who was then touring the United States and had just given the American Bar Association the benefit of her view that Television coverage ‘gave terrorists the oxygen of publicity’.

As anticipated by the journalists, Thatcher, still unaware of the controversial BBC production, gave a hard hitting reply. The Sunday Times had its story: It published the news of the BBC film under the headline ‘Thatcher slams IRA film’.

The sequence of events that followed this Times ‘scoop’ illustrates many of the elements in the debate on the role of public service broadcasting in reporting crisis. How do Public Broadcasting institutions maintain credibility, independence and accountability, particularly in a time of national crisis?

Following the news report, the Thatcher government, already unhappy with the BBC’s news and current affairs programmes, decided to step in. Let me quote Roger Bolton, head of the BBC’s Network production centre, on what happened next; ‘The then Home Secretary, Mr. Leon Britten, wrote to the Chairman of the BBC Governor’s asking him to stop the programme going out and included the following incredible statement in his letter; ‘Even if the programme and any surrounding material were to present terrorist organisations in a wholly unfavourable light, I would still ask you not to permit it to be broadcast’ (1986:100)

The Home Secretary’s letter put the BBC’s Governors in a quandry. The government had not passed any legislation banning the broadcasting of interviews with leaders of political parties, even those accused of fostering terrorism. Thus there was no legal basis for Britten’s request. According to Bolton, whom we can take as representing the BBC administrations point of view, what should have happened is as follows:

The BBC’s Board of Governors should and could have politely replied that if the Home Secretary wished he could exercise his legal right and ban the programme, but since the BBC Management, having seen the film, regarded it as suitable for transmission with a couple of changes, the programme would go ahead.
The Governors could then review the programme after transmission and decide whether the management's decision was right. If not, they would consider policy changes and/or replacing any executives concerned. (1986:101)

This no doubt was the ideal. In reality it did not happen that way. The BBC Governors insisted on seeing the programme themselves before transmission thus, according to Bolton, 'effectively passing a vote of no confidence in the Board of Management and taking direct editorial control themselves'. Furthermore, the Governors by a vote of 10:1 decided against showing the film.

We need not, in this paper, go into subsequent developments of the 'Real Lives' affair. Indeed, many of the Public Broadcasting institutions of our region are quite used to much more blatant examples of interference and official censorship. What is important here are the issues relating to Broadcasting policy raised by this 'episode'. Bolton mentions three such issues.

(a) Who runs the BBC?
(b) Are the principles of its journalism to be altered?
(c) Are the governors representative of society and are they capable of defending Public Service Broadcasting against party politics, and a frequently hysterical press? (1986: 101)

The Structure of Broadcasting Authorities

I have used an example from the BBC in this paper for two reasons. First, the 'Real Lives' episode has been well documented. So the interested reader can have access to all the details of this controversy. Second, and perhaps more important, it draws our attention to the decision-making processes of a Broadcasting establishment, which is a crucial element in the 'problematique' of broadcasting during a national crisis.

Though we in the South Asian region, and, I think rightly, look on the BBC as an attractive model of a Broadcasting structure, we must keep in mind that (a) There are alternatives models (b) That the BBC itself has been subject to severe criticism, particularly since the sixties.

On the other hand we have to recognise that Broadcasting institutions in South Asian countries too have changed. They have evolved from Government Departments of Broadcasting to Semi-independent Public Corporations. Indeed this search for an appropriate Broadcasting structure - as we have seen in the recent past in India, is one of the dominant characteristics of the media scene in our region.

A Media Culture:

It was Noel Annan, head of what was popularly known as the Annan committee for the future of Broadcasting, who forcefully put the view that notions of freedom and responsibility in broadcasting are not 'things in themselves' but represent values which arise out of that society itself. In other words a Broadcasting system of responsibility is only a part of that society's understanding of 'representatives' are not representatives of the society in which they live'.

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Says Annan, "All I am saying is this: when you examine how free broadcasters are to interpret the news, or to interview politicians or other people with power, or to present programmes dealing with social problems, or to write plays which interpret and criticise their society, you will find that their freedom is a reflection of the culture of their country". (1981:14)

Annan examines three major Broadcasting organisations which have approaches to critical issues quite different from those of the BBC. The French Model, for example, while allowing maximum freedom to print media and radio, restricts the freedom of the major T.V. channels which are in any case state owned. Since the advent of Mitterrand the Gaullist type grip on T.V. has been loosened through licensing private channels. But they are so entertainment oriented, having to earn their keep, paying no state subsidies or license fees that government controlled news still predominates. On the other hand the Japanese, particularly the NHK, Broadcasting style is to aim at consensus which in the NHK charter is described as 'not disturbing public Security, good manners and morals'.

Broadcasting in the United States on the other hand is quite different. Annan describes it well, 'The principles which govern American broadcasting are totally opposed to those in France. It is in theory the freest in the world. There are thousands of TV and broadcasting stations and their output could not possibly be controlled by public bodies. What controls them and limits their freedom is, as we all know, commercial interests. For the American Broadcaster is not responsible to a conception of the public interest as broadcasters in Japan or Britain are. He is responsible to what those who advertise and pay for the programmes believe the American public wants... And there is built into the American conception of Democracy the notion that the customer is the ultimate arbiter of the product and if there are not enough customers then the product must be scrapped and a more popular one marketed. The great rule in North American broadcasting is this. Never offend the Majority and try not to offend the many minorities'. (1981:15)

Having recognised a diversity of approaches to the notion of 'responsibility' we are confronted with a further dilemma.
In the classical period of the BBC, dominated by leading figures such like Reith and Greene, English middle class values were accepted as representative of a national consensus. Belief in Royalty, the High Church, Literary culture, civility and a well-defined relationship among the different social classes was the bedrock on which this 'Reithian' intellectual and moral world was created.

Since the 1960's however, that consensus has broken down. Post-Suez England revolted against middle class values. For instance the angry young men - Playwrights of Theatre, Radio and Television like John Osborne, (Look back in anger) tore apart this notion of a common high culture to which everyone subscribed. The Beatles, Punks and the advent of a youthful, working class 'rock culture' were symptomatic of this pluralism.

Chasms opened out in what had been a strong social structure. The strength of the structure had been the pride of the nation, not merely internal to broadcasting. As the broadcaster became more imaginative, as he crossed new territory, as he infiltrated old defences of what sociologists called forces of social control, there was amazement and protest. The broadcasters had begun to reflect the pluralism in British Society' (Annan, 1981, 16). Thus we have to see that the BBC model itself is now based on attempting to redefine its role in relation to political authority. Hence the constant tension between Broadcasters and the government in power, be it that of Willson, Callaghan, Thatcher or Major. A leading MP said recently that 'BBC Producers are a bunch of Trots'. South Asian broadcasting too has evolved in various ways from its earlier position of direct government control.

Look at the Sri Lanka experience.

' BROADCASTING IN SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka was the earliest British colony to introduce Radio broadcasting. In 1921 the Governor of the Island appointed a committee under the chairmanship of the Post Master General to report whether 'broadcasting should be permitted in Ceylon' and if so, the manner in which it should be implemented. The recommendations of this committee, published in 1923, were far reaching:

(a) Broadcasting should be permitted in Ceylon, and every facility be accorded to the public.

(b) Broadcasting should be undoubtedly be under state control, though not necessarily operated by the state, and, under normal conditions, it should be left to private enterprise.

The war brought the latest broadcasting technology to Ceylon. Powerful transmitters were set up under the South East Asia Command. After the war the government of the transfer of the SEAC transmitters. New studios constructed in Torrington square, Radio Ceylon was born on 1st October 1949. It started out as a government Department and from 1952 was headed by a senior civil servant. This was a pattern common to all South Asian countries.
Though a government department, Radio Ceylon like other south Asian stations, largely because of the metropolitan influence, upheld concepts of editorial independence. As Peter Golding, states, 'Most Third World broadcasting organisations are not separate from the state. Yet professional detachment survives as a goal at a second level, that of daily production and occupational practice'. (1977, 300)

Developments both local and international, led to a cry for greater independence for broadcasting. A similar concern lies behind the current proposals for the liberalisation of broadcasting in India. Thus in 1967 the Ceylon Broadcasting Corporation was established in order to give Radio more editorial and financial independence. Such a need was emphasised in the Hulugalle report which recommended the establishment of a Public Corporation for Broadcasting.

* Broadcasting under Government control necessarily limits its scope. News, news comments, foreign affairs and other programmes of similar nature have a censorship naturally imposed on them as a result of the institution being a Government Department and Officers handling them being Government servants. The Officers always like to play safe and whenever they are in doubt of 'suitability' the programme concerned or the particular reference concerned is obviously left out. In this the Officers are not to blame, but this results in the listener losing what he had a right to listen to’ (Hulugalle Commission, 1966, p.19).

Corporations under attack

Public Corporations have been described as 'a combination of public ownership, public accountability and business management for public ends'.

Today, however the concept of the Public Corporation itself is under attack... Unlike the hey day of public corporations - essentially the post war period, when public investment, central planning and a desire to 'put the government in the driving seat' was evident, today the Corporation, particularly as a media organisation, is under fire from both Left and the Right. The Left sees the state domination of media as an instrument of the dominant capitalist culture, disseminating essentially a conformist ideology. It rejects the idea of a common core of values.

The Right on the other hand criticises the Corporation as bureaucratic and 'Statist'. The Corporation tolerates government meddling, promotes 'official' culture and devalues the market place.

A crucial factor here are developments in media technology. Unlike the immediate post war period when only Governments could afford to make investments in Broadcasting technology, today it is cheap and can be exploited by smaller organisations. Thus new media technologies permit a more decentralised type of radio and TV - Narrow casting as against broadcasting is feasible. This availability is the future to evolve pluralistic, decentralised models for Radio and TV... It is interesting that both Sinhala (JVP) and Tamil (LTTE) militant groups began to operate their own 'low cost' broadcasting stations.
Crisis? What 'Crisis'?

The foregoing discussion shows that there is no easy definition of 'crisis'. In the past any threat to middle class 'consensus' values could be defined as a crisis. But in a modern pluralistic context where social groups tend to pursue their own cultural goals such a clear identification becomes difficult.

For a national broadcasting station there are both (a) formal and (b) non-formal indicators of a Crisis.

The formal indicators are largely legal in nature. For this we have to consider:
(a) The constitution of the country
(b) The statutes which incorporate the media institutions
(c) Related legislation regarding the media.
(d) Legislation for the Prevention of Terrorism etc which deal with emergency situations.

It is interesting to note that the target of government legislation regarding 'abuse' of media is the Print and not electronic media (Coomaraswamy: 1980:26). Apparently Sri Lankan Government are satisfied that it has adequate control over the electronic media and no special legislation is necessary.

The Sri Lanka constitution vests the President with extraordinary powers to declare a state of emergency, if in his discretion, the circumstances warrant him to do so. Such a proclamation allows for the passing of executive decrees or emergency regulations without debate in Parliament.

Radhika Coomaraswamy in a study of the regulatory framework for the Press during the period 1971 - 1977 in Sri Lanka, identifies the following emergency regulations pertaining to the Press:
(a) Editorial comment, feature stories, news reports on any subject submitted for approval by the Competent Authority.

(b) There could be no publication of any cabinet paper without prior permission of the competent authority.

(c) No publication of any matter which is considered or is alleged to be considered by any Minister/Ministry.

(d) No person may affix in a public place or distribute among the public any poster, handbill or leaflet without prior police permission.

In the case of electronic media, control is exercised through (a) powers vested in the relevant Minister in Acts of Incorporation to issue 'directions' to the Boards of Radio and TV organisations
(b) Informal contact with the Board, whose members are appointed by the relevant minister (except ex-officio members, who are also government appointees to their original positions).
(c) Direct contact with the executive staff of the Corporation by the Minister, Permanant Secretary and Ministry staff.

This third element of control is clearly seen in the South Asian countries and is part of the 'bureaucratic culture' in which Public Corporations are embedded. This tendency negates the independence of the Corporation and attacks the very basis on which a Department of Broadcasting was abolished and a Public Corporation set up. This form of extra legal 'interference' has become a standard practise and is a point of conflict and mismanagement of all South Asian state media organisations.

Ethnic Conflict

There can be many types of crises which the media is called upon to report. I will however take as an example the ethnic crisis, which appears to be a pan-South Asian phenomenon.

The nation states of South Asia are multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-linguistic. One of the major consequences of the colonial experience is the coming together - after diverse arrangements - of such communities to form the post-colonial state. Today we see the loosening of that compact and the rise of regionalism and particularism. The centre which used the concept of 'secularism' as the glue that held the union together is now under attack from these particularistic groupings.

To some extent this conflict has been the creation of the media. In this they have been the partners of the politicians. The media in our region are segmented on linguistic and regional lines. The same newspaper company or Broadcasting authority caters to a variety of linguistically demarcated audiences. In addition, in the Indian main land, provincial newspapers and broadcasting stations create their own audiences. It feeds them with images of their past grandeur and present impotence. As Benedict Anderson demonstrates, the media creates an 'imagined community' out of an amorphous, segmented mass of people. It is the media, particularly the provincial media, that gave a Mass-based, continuous platform for the perceived special interests of various fragmented groups in the national polity. This does not mean that the media created communalism. But it was a significant element of the social processes of post-colonial society which led to the rise of separatism. Inder Malhotra, in his recent biography of Indira Gandhi describes this explosive mix of media, politics and local grievances which led to the crisis of Sikh separatism in the Punjab.

It is also necessary to consider that dissident groups, particularly armed separatists, use the media in their campaigns for local and international sympathy. The TV Camera and contacts with international media are as much a separatists weapon as the T56. The way in which the Biafran separatist war was projected to the world through images of starving children by a western advertising agency hired for this purpose is now a part of media lore. Dissidents must create 'media events' if they are to maintain the media monopoly of the regime in power.
This creates a further dilemma for broadcast media. Unlike the print media which restricts its clientele to literates and distances itself from the reader because of the printed word, Television is a highly emotive medium. We see an event in images, without realising the subtle editing that goes on first by the cameraman and later in the editing is more powerful as a call to action.

A Third aspect of this problem is that unlike in fields such as art, culture, international news etc., where the government may be inclined to be liberal and leave decision making to the legally constituted authorities of a media organisation (I am being optimistic here) in areas such as ethnic conflict and terrorism there are strong pressures for the politicians to take control of media. These fields are so politically explosive and subject to manipulation in the messages transmitted that the Minister who does not get involved will lose the confidence of his colleagues. Television for instance, in a crisis, not only addresses a passive audience, but also the 'enemy' who sees the telecast as a statement of government intentions. These are the realities of broadcasting management.

Guide Lines

How then does one evolve guidelines in such a context? Let us begin by looking at the Broadcaster himself.

1. The Broadcaster is not a judge.

As Annan puts it “The television studio is not a courtroom. An interviewer should be able to put someone on the spot without putting him in the dock”. The electronic media should put different points of view in a conflict before its audience.

2. A distinction should be made between news and current affairs

Under news we report events with as little bias as possible. In current affairs the producer presents events accompanied by the views of different people on those events. A common enough problem is that the producers' bias shows through in presenting these points of view. Credibility lies in allowing access to those with contrary opinions to express. “Broadcasters should realise that they should be good hosts to different opinions and different individuals. They are hosts at a party, not the rulers of the state”.

3. Recognise that some views have greater weight than others

There may be small vociferous groups which seek to manipulate the media. Let me quote Annan on such a situation. “The Broadcasters are under no obligation to make programmes expressing this view. They are under a greater obligation to express points of view which other far larger and more widely supported groups hold. It is all very well to challenge orthodoxy - and that is what freedom of expression is partly about. But put fairly and the eccentricity of unorthodox views is exactly what freedom is about” (1981:21).
4. Remember that views and values are subject to change

Particularly in times of crisis, the broadcaster must be well informed of developments. He should have lines of access to all parties in a conflict. He must be quick to sense and highlight the moving away from fixed positions so that other parties can respond to such changes. A related problem here however is that parties to the conflict may wish to negotiate away from the public gaze. This creates a very difficult situation for the journalist who then has to use his judgement based on his own sources. However, it must be made clear that in such a situation, the government must exercise its own responsibilities eg. the provisions of Emergency regulations etc., instead of trying to pressurise or threaten the journalist.

5. Uphold the aims and objectives of the Broadcasting Organisation

Media Corporations have been established by acts of Parliament. Their objectives have been clearly defined; it must ensure:
(a) that nothing is included in any programme which offends against good taste or decency or is likely to incite to crime or to lead to disorder or to offend any racial or religious susceptibilities or to be offensive to public feelings;

(b) the programmes maintain a proper balance in their subject matter and a high general standard of quality; and

(c) that any news given in the programmes (in whatever form) is presented with due accuracy and impartiality and with due regard to the public interest.

6. Uphold the Constitution of the Country

The journalist must find some reference point. The constitution, which upholds the unity and territorial integrity of the country, and equal status for all its citizens, can provide such a focus. Loyalty to the constitution goes beyond the sectarian interests of a party. (For example, the Watergate investigation finally rested on President Nixon's Contravention of the US Constitution, which is an impeachable offence).