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The Changing Broadcast Media Environment: Perspectives From Malaysia

By

Nawiyah Che'Lah
SEMINAR ON 'MEDIA MONITORS IN ASIA'

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THE CHANGING BROADCAST MEDIA ENVIRONMENT:

PERSPECTIVES FROM MALAYSIA

BY

NAWIYAH CHE’LAH

RTM/RADIO TELEVISION MALAYSIA
THE CHANGING BROADCAST MEDIA ENVIRONMENT: PERSPECTIVES FROM MALAYSIA

By
Nawiyah Che'Lah
RTM/ Radio Television Malaysia

The Government will amend the Broadcasting Act 1988 to enable Malaysians to use a wider range of broadcasting facilities, including the parabolic dish. We cannot stop the development of information technology ......

However it did not mean that Malaysia would implement the 'open sky' policy. All the programmes beamed to Malaysia would be controlled to ensure that negative elements that could pollute Malaysian culture and values could be censored ....

** Datuk Mohamed Rahmat, Minister of Information (Quoted in STAR, June 9, 1994)

INTRODUCTION

The Broadcast media now is facing a huge challenge. With the advent of new computer and telecommunication technologies and the robust economic growth, a new era in broadcasting has ushered in where a revolution is taking place over Asian skies and in communities and homes throughout the region. It has not happened overnight though. It has started as long ago as 1967 when satellite television was first introduced to the region when INTELSAT II satellite was launched to connect North America with Asia
and the Pacific. Another local and global satellite history was 1969 when INTELSAT closed the Indian Ocean ‘gap’ in its worldwide network, permitting the entire region to see the first man to land on the moon. Television news exchanges and special events coverage, like the olympics followed after that. From then on, a number of satellites were launched which accelerate the arrival of the satellite television in the region and of course that affects the Malaysian broadcasting scenario especially now that Malaysia is blessed with an economic boom which grew at an average of 9% in the last five years and is expected to grow by at least 8% in the next five years.

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF TELEVISION

Television was introduced in 1963 and a second TV network was set up in 1969. As a state-run broadcasting media, RTM’s main preoccupation has been with national development, given the multi racial and multi religious character of the Malaysian society. The roles have changed over the years though, in line with other development.

Today, TV1 the **Premier Channel** has been committed to promoting unity, security, development, nation building, consolidating loyalty and national integration. It is thus a channel of communication between the government and the people. Whereas TV2, the **Golden Channel** does not only inform and educate the public but also acts as motivator and entertainer.
For 21 years, the Government provides news, information and entertainment over the two channels until 1984 when TV3 was granted a licence to operate as a privatised channel, a momentous decision that broke the government monopoly in broadcasting. The launch of TV3 was timely too. It came at a time when the public was hungry for more choices and more entertainment. It also concentrates on news and documentaries besides entertainment. Its objectives now is for people to tune in to the station ‘like a radio’, all day and all night long, everyday.

In 1988 the Government stations responded to the growth of the commercial station by taking on a commercially-orientate attitude whilst never deviating from its supraordinate goals of ‘infotainment’ (information and entertainment). Armed with the philosophies and strategies of Malaysia incorporated, RTM privatised its commercial operations whilst retaining absolute control on programming needs of the population. A ‘MEMO’ philosophy was observed, i.e ‘Message first, Money second’ maintaining the principle that the Government had bigger priorities towards the development of the people and the country than making money.

Each TV channel is on air at the average of 18 hours a day. In terms of programme content the menu provided by the three channels is not only satisfactory in terms of variety but also its recency. Currently, RTM has seven 1/2 hours news programmes daily whilst TV3 has two 1/2 hour news belt and several news breaks. The two stations are virtually screening all the latest dramas and movies. Over 65% of all programmes are local content, either produced by the stations themselves or by the local production houses. The remainder are programmes syndicated from United States, Europe, Latin America, Australia and other Asian countries such as Hong Kong and Japan.
The audience of mixed population of Malays and the indigenous people, Chinese, and Indians and other races give a challenging task for the broadcasters. Their cultures and religious beliefs are very different. To fulfill the obligations, RTM and TV3 broadcast in four languages, Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil. The programmers have to take into considerations the characteristics of the various population groups. The broadcasters take this as an impetus rather than an impediment to the growth of the industry enriching the varieties of the programmes.

To a limited extent co-productions and joint productions are carried out by both RTM and TV3. They are done on regional basis of ASEAN (Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia ans Asian framework. Limited ventures are also carried out with American, Canadian and some European countries such as Germany. However some of these activities are mere 'cooperation' between stations rather than co-production or joint production.

WHO ARE THE PLAYERS IN THE MALAYSIAN TELEVISION INDUSTRY?

The three existing television networks, TV1, TV2 and TV3 are interlinked with other stakeholders: regulators, policy makers, advertisers, advertising agencies, programme suppliers, producers and of course viewers. And broadcasting considerations in turn are linked to audience demands, programming contents, consumer interests, advertising interests, national interests, the network's image and the financial investment of the networks. Therefore, the players play a very important role in determining the broadcasting media environment.
THE EMERGENCE OF NEW CHANNELS

The main challenge faced by the TV industry now is the changing broadcasting environment due to the rapid development in technologies. The banning of the dishes in Malaysia at the moment is in a way a blessing in disguise to the industry. But the time will come sooner than expected that such a law will no longer be effective as the dishes become smaller and smaller which will make it impossible to detect and therefore to enforce the ban. The emergence of cable and pay TV and not to forget the rising operational costs will add to the list of challenges.

Perhaps one should learn from the lesson experienced by the three major American networks ABC, CBS and NBC in the 80's and early 90's. With the emergence of cable TV, video cassette recorders and the FOX TV Network, the three networks lost their way and never quite recovered in spite of the fact they have changed ownership many times to save the situation. Cable TV in America rather than the networks now seems to control the market that more homes have cable television.

The broadcasting scenario in this country in the next few years will definitely experience change too as people change and policies change. There is nothing much one can do to stop the wave of change that blows towards the industry. It has but to accept the change and adapt it to its own needs and advantage. The change which is difficult to compete on equal terms, may brings possible threats to national culture and identity, to the established values, religions and customs. It may bring threat to the industry itself by taking away viewership and advertising revenue, even to the national economy by
advertising foreign products. To survive such an invasion, the industry will have to improve and upgrade the standards of its own programmes that will be capable to meet the competition. Of course the audience want to see the foreign programmes but they also like to watch the local programmes. The invasion of foreign programmes would succeed only if there are no strong and better alternatives offered to the local viewers which prove that audience would prefer programmes that they could identify with, in their own language with the life of local communities. It has been proven too that the most popular programmes screened by all the three channels are those locally produced. But of course we can never underestimate the power of the foreign programmes.

There is no cable or satellite TV yet in Malaysia. However, the broadcasting environment is changing now. By next year, 1995, there will be at least four additional TV channels where the Government has already awarded the licence for a fourth channel, TV4 which will begin operating by early 1995. And the Government has also called for proposals on the subscription services called SNS (Satellite Network Service) which would carry two news and one sports channel. It would not be a surprise after that if SNS decides to have two additional channels carrying entertainment and movies.

All these would definitely bring out some regulatory issues. There would be at least seven TV channels vying for the same piece of advertising revenue which would definitely spawn series of reaction from the other media too such as the newspapers and the outdoor advertisers. Whilst music/video copyrights and encryption of programmes are another issues that could be of concern to broadcasting agencies and suppliers of programmes.
SATELLITE TV INDUSTRY

What we have now from the sky are ASIASAT 1, PALAPA B2P, INTELSAT (POR 180 E), RIMSAT, APSTAR, PANAMSAT and THAICOM. These delivery options will be fully utilised by users in every part of the satellite industry. Already we have STAR TV, ABC, ABN, CNN, BBC and a lot more. Added to these delivery systems are the advances in technology which can make programmes cheaper and more attractive. And Digital Compression technology will enable 500 TV channels to be transmitted direct to viewers’ homes.

By 1995, MEASAT (Malaysia East Asia Satellite), the Malaysian Communications Satellite will be launched. Apart from being a Regional Programmes Services for South East Asia, this will make it possible for Direct to Home TV and Radio services in Malaysia.

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF RADIO BROADCASTING

Radio was first set up in 1946. Today, Radio Malaysia has 24 radio stations which are strategically located in the various state capitals and towns. And Radio Malaysia broadcasts through six main networks namely Radio 1, which broadcast in ‘Bahas malaysia’, Radio 2 the FM stereo, Radio 3 for Capital City Broadcast and regional stations where the programmes aired are more localised and relevant to the region, Radio 4 broadcast in English, Radio 5 in Mandarin and Radio 6 in Tamil.
The move towards a new era of commercialism and technology is not limited to television alone. Radio is equally embarking on a bold move to capitalise on the flourishing industry. Plans are afoot to provide new services with the cooperation of the private sector. By the end of this year, a new Radio network ‘Radio 8 or Highway Radio’ will begin its transmission in two languages; English and Malay. Its main purpose is to disseminate the latest happenings in the country and abroad and give information on tourism in Malaysia. At the same time the Highway Radio will give advice and educate the road users on road safety and keep them entertained with music and songs.

CLOSING REMARKS

The merging of computer technologies, telecommunications and broadcasting, as well as various signal delivery methods into integrated digital system serving everyone, everywhere known as ‘information superhighway’ may affect the broadcasting environment in a very near future. Subscription television will be one of the vehicles on the information superhighway and we have to make sure that we know how to manage this new technology and the information and entertainment it will bring in a way that will improve the lives of our audiences.

These new technologies and a more sophisticated and affluent audience will lead to narrow casting. These developments will give birth to subscriber support services rather than merely advertiser support services. However, the Broadcasting environment in Malaysia is regulated in order to be socially responsible. And broadcasting networks
have to uphold their aims and objectives and maintain a balance between economic and social concerns and they have to take into account the value systems and way of life of the major ethnic groups, different age groups, gender, occupation and cultural backgrounds in their programming. The various stakeholders have and will continue to influence the growth and development of radio and television but viewers will remain the most important resource of the industry.