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<th>Broadcasting in Asia: twenty-five years from now</th>
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Twenty-five years ago when AMIC was founded, radio was the most established communication medium besides newspapers in almost all countries in Asia. Though television had made its appearance in most countries, it was in its infancy and colour transmission was limited to a few countries.

By 1985 most countries in Asia had began colour transmissions and monochrome television was already on its way out. Upto this point, with the exception of a few countries, broadcasting -- radio and television -- was the sole monopoly of the governments and private broadcasting was almost unheard of.

During the last ten years or so, three significant developments have taken place in quick succession. **First**, the establishment of private television organizations as competitors to the government owned television stations and corporatization (or promoting the corporate culture) of government radio and television organizations.

Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore were the leaders in the field. TV3 was established as a private television station in Malaysia in 1984. In Indonesia, TVRI's monopoly was broken with the establishment of RCTI, the second national television channel. Singapore Broadcasting Corporation was further divided into Radio Corporation of Singapore; Television Corporation of
Singapore and Singapore International Media Company in order to give further boost to privatization attempts.

Second was the beginning of transmission of direct-to-home television signals through satellites and STAR TV of Hong Kong was in the forefront when it started transmitting four television channels throughout Asia (a fifth one, ZeeTV in Hindi was added soon after).

The third of these developments was the introduction of FM stereo radio services in most countries. It gave a new life to radio broadcasting in Asia and saw the resurgence of radio.

Another development during the same period was the extension of broadcasting and transmission hours of radio and television services which resulted in enormous increase in the ownership of radio and television sets. Though the population of Asia has more than doubled during the past 25 years, the increase in listenership and viewership grew manifold since the benefits of economic development during the period had percolated to all strata of society and with the increasing purchasing power the radio and television sets were no more a sign of prosperity.

Highlighting the events during the past 25 years, Rainer Welzel says, "25 years ago the programme and production people approached the engineers saying we have thousand problems, don't you have at least one solution for us? The answer was, May be, it will cost you a lot. Today the engineers approach programme and production people, we have a thousand solutions, don't you have one problem for us? We make it cheap."

He further says, "The rapid changes of the media landscape during the last 25 years were not triggered by one single event but pushed forward by the development of the information technology such as digitalization, high integration of components, direct satellite broadcasting, signal compression and time compression, single carrier per channel (SCPC) techniques, introduction of computers into production, etc. As a result a remarkable deregulation could be observed making available entirely new opportunities for broadcasters such as, transborder broadcasting, digital audio broadcasting (DAB), digital television, interactive multimedia channels, high quality multi-
channel cable distribution of television and radio signals, time compressed
distribution of video-on-demand and the latest phenomenon of Internet.

Continuing in the same vein Rukmin Wijemanne says, "I think development
in each of the periods (radio, B&W TV, colour TV, satellite) made huge
impacts, which were "earth shattering" in the context of the technology
present at that time. But one that has and is making an unprecedented
(even drastic) impact is the development of digital techniques and digital
compression. This technology is not only revolutionizing the broadcast
sector, but also telecommunication and computer industry sectors. The
previously compartmentalized industries are experiencing a blurring of the
lines of demarcation, and as a result competition from unexpected directions.
The impact of these new technologies on the society would be so complete
that ways we live our lives will change dramatically".

Highlighting the most dramatic changes that have occurred in the last 25
years, Jai Chandiram lists, "Satellite and cable distribution of the television
and radio signals and interface of technologies which permit interactivity"

What the future holds for us?

All the developments described above were very gradual and spanned a
long time. However, the development of newer technologies has picked up
a greater momentum and speed. The obsolescence time of any new
technology has been reduced to about three years on an average or even
less. This has particularly happened in the field of computers and
digitalization.

The earlier innovations and improvements in technology brought some
welcome changes and were readily accepted by the users and were not
seen as a threat to the survival of individual medium. Until now, the computer
and digital technologies have significantly helped broadcasting in terms of
quality and speed of production and transmission. But now the offshoot of
computer and digital technology -- Internet and WWW-- is threatening to
become a mass medium in its own right. At the same time we are now
talking of digital convergence and convergence of all media on one single
platform. The fad is catching up fast to the extent that many international
and important newspapers have also gone on-line on Internet.
Internet, which owes its existence to the "cold war era", satisfied the need for collecting, processing and distributing rival's defense data for counter offensive measures. Since the threats of the cold war era are no more in existence, Internet was further developed as an information tool and provider. The basic reason for the phenomenal increase in Internet users is the human need to communicate. It has also become affordable since it is widely available on computing platforms.

Internet can be either a very passive or interactive medium and that basically depends on the user. Convergence is bringing together print and electronic media and viewer softwares are making it possible, since information now is all stored in bits and bits are easy to manipulate. Internet is, therefore, capable of merging print and television together. Convergence thus promises a richer medium for the consumers, though more work for producers.

If all the technological predictions come true, they will change the way we watch television or listen to radio today. For example, the way news is currently gathered, produced and disseminated, as well as it will also change the way news is currently consumed. News will become anytime, anywhere the consumer wants it to be. It may take a form of dialogue between the viewer and the producer or we may want to learn from a variety of producers. It may blur or even change the definition of news altogether.

Time, in the case of radio and television, and space, in the case of print media, are the two biggest constraints and thus justify the need for gatekeepers (e.g., editors, programme producers, schedulers, policymakers, etc.) who decide what to provide, how to provide and when to provide the news, information or entertainment within the limits of time and space. With the convergence, these constraints will vanish and the consumer (viewer or the listener) will be in the driver's seat demanding what he or she wants to have and when (a time most convenient to his or her choice).
Prospects for the next Twenty-five years

It is not only difficult but also impossible to predict what the technology will bring or where it will take us in the next 25 years. For the simple reason that what is not invented yet is impossible to forecast. But it is certain that

* there will be a lot of television channels with digital transmission;

* most services delivered on the wire will be interactive;

* a lot of media packages will be available to most households;

* public broadcasting will probably continue to provide the cultural mix that is required to promote and safeguard the cultural identity of individual societies and be able to meet the onslaught of the so-called international/global broadcasting;

* Media and IT industries will become a major force to reckon with;

According to Rainer Welzel, "Researchers in Japan and Europe predict that within the next 25 years the media and IT industries will contribute more than 65 per cent to the national gross product in the industrialized countries.

"But due to the fast changes of the media and IT industries a precise forecast for more than five years is rather a guessing game. It seems certain though that for the coming years the development of technology will go on to be the driving force behind the changing media world and as a result of that we can expect further deregulation.

"Because of the changing environment a couple of terms will have to be discussed, defined and eventually adjusted, such as: What is broadcasting and who is a broadcaster? Freedom of information, where does it start and where does it end? What is the role of public broadcasting? Information superhighway, who has access, who has the power? Are we steering into an information class society?"
"Technologically everything seems possible but how we are going to handle it socio-economically?

"All these questions indicate that we are exposed to a highly dynamic process, and that the coming changes can not be handled on a national level alone. Decisions makers, opinion leaders and professionals have to meet on international, regional and global platforms to look together for the best possible solution."

Wijemanne stresses, "There will be a difficulty in defining who a broadcaster is in the future. The technology will provide the telecommunications operators, computer software companies, cable operators, satellite operators, etc. to provide various services to the public. There is also the Internet which will provide radio, television, multimedia, text, graphics, etc. interactively. The broadcaster will have to fit in this large picture. Of course, over the air broadcasting will remain as a useful service particularly for those on the move. With the exponential increase of channels for radio and television programmes, there will be an equally exponential growth in the demand for good quality programmes. Who is better equipped or skilled than a broadcaster. But would he be a broadcaster, or merely a producer? This is a difficult question to answer, which is being debated in Europe at the moment".

Sharad Sadhu's version for the future is rather simplistic, "A single conduit providing all types of services, where the content provider and the end user are completely unknown to each other".

Asian countries, by and large, used to be ten to fifteen years behind in the technology field compared to their counterparts in Europe and America. Will this gap remain in the next few years, I am not so sure.

Dr. Gary Tonge, Director of Engineering, Independent Television Commission, UK, told European broadcasters, "If we believe George Gilder in his book "Life After Television", then technological developments will soon release the individual from the manipulative tyranny of the broadcasters. "Television is a tool of tyranny," he said. "Its overthrow will be a major force for freedom and individuality, culture and morality. That overthrow is
at hand." He quotes Andy Lippman of the Media Laboratory at MIT in the States, as writing, "Forget television sets. In three years' time there won't be any. Instead there will be computers with high quality display screens." That was in 1990 and if there is a lesson to be learnt here it is never to make any precise timescale predictions!"

Thank you.

Notes:


2. Rukmin Wijemanne, Senior Engineer, Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, personal communication.


4. Jai Chandiram, Deputy Director-General, Doordarshan India, New Delhi, India, personal communication.


About the Author

Mr Brajesh Bhatia is a communication consultant by profession and is currently the managing director of Fourth Dimension (M) Sdn Bhd which provides computer graphics services to advertising agencies, production houses and broadcasting organizations in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Before venturing on his own in late 1989, he was deputy director at the Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development. Well known in the region as a broadcast trainer for the past twenty years, he has worked at the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, Bangkok, Thailand; Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre, Singapore; and the Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.