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The Social And Cultural Impact Of Satellite Broadcasting
In The Asia-Pacific Region

By

Stewart Marshall
THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL IMPACT OF SATELLITE BROADCASTING
IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION

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In the olden days, Aboriginal people didn't have any satellites. They only had their traditional law on their tribal lands... Now people chasing after them with satellites to interrupt their tribal law.... That's why we got the land back, to keep away from European things.

(Darby Jampijinpa Ross, Warlpiri elder, quoted in Michaels, 1986, p.1)

1 Introduction

This quotation by Darby Jampijinpa Ross expresses a fear held by many leaders in the Asia-Pacific region - that satellite broadcasting will lead to increasing westernisation of the indigenous cultures.

Most work on the social and cultural impact of satellite broadcasting has been argued by force of logic or sheer emotion - little empirical work has been carried out, and there is no consensus as to how it might be. As McQuail says of this broadcasting, "...the real cultural impact of imports has never been investigated, only assumed and little account is taken in the export-import studies of actual and relative audience reception" (1992, p.294).
In this paper, I examine some of the research literature on 'effects' and 'impacts', and then consider some of the 'resistant' characteristics of indigenous cultures. I argue that these 'resistant' characteristics can be strengthened and used in order to ensure the survival and development of indigenous cultures, especially if accompanied by culturally appropriate modernisation. It is in the context of this debate that we must consider the future role of satellite broadcasting in the Asia-Pacific region.

2 Access to television in the Asia-Pacific region

The experience of television is as varied as the countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Television has been in Guam since the mid 1950's (Stewart, 1991), and in American Samoa since 1964 (Thomas, 1994). Whereas Singapore contemplates household connection to optic fibres, Papau New Guinea struggles to provide direct broadcasting to its major cities. In Fiji, a population of 750,000 own 100,000 video players (Plange, 1993). And in India it is estimated that by the year 2000 some 39 per cent of the population will be in areas covered by television broadcasting (Kishore, 1994).

The harsh reality is that the audiences of television are very much limited by economic circumstances. Papua New Guinea has one commercial station, whilst other countries can offer public television, or mixtures. Even with a diversity of programming (presuming it comes with a larger number of stations to chose from), there is still the
inability to own television receivers that hinders access for a large part of the region's population. Outside of the urban middle-classes, the experience of television must be seen as tentative and marginal.

The significance of this is that access to satellite broadcasting will exist in the same circumstances. Whilst the transmissions may be accessible to all - the coverage area provided by Star TV in Asia is potentially 2.7 billion people, in some 38 countries (Menon, 1994) - the ability to purchase the equipment and pay subscription fees if they are introduced will make its audience more limited than television at present.

3 The effects of television

I recall some of the effects when television was first introduced into my parents' house in England. The seating arrangements changed, meals were no longer served at the table, conversation was confined to the advertising breaks, and many other social activities were similarly transformed. I also recall similar effects when television was introduced in Papua New Guinea, e.g., public television in Rabaul market caused many people to stop their story-telling and instead to gather in a large silent crowd.

Empirical research supports these anecdotal accounts of the effects of television on social activities and communication. In Fiji, Plange (1993) found that the use of
video had an influence on family relations and the use of time. Murray and Kippax (1977) studied the impact of television viewing on adults in three Australian towns. One town had television for five years; the second town had received it for only one year and the third did not have television at all. On the basis of the results of this study, the researchers maintain that the greatest decreases in the use of alternative media occur when television is still novel. But they also found a longer term impact of television to be "a major restructuring of one's conception of the media and patterns of daily activities" (Murray and Kippax, 1977, p.42).

Stewart (1991), in her study of Micronesian women and television, reports that many women in Guam are concerned about violence on broadcast television and women on Yap are concerned about violence on hired videocassettes. Whilst there is some anecdotal evidence showing the power of video and television to influence criminal behaviour in Micronesia, "the existence and extent of this power is extremely difficult to prove" (Stewart, 1991, p.85)

However, some studies by social psychologists suggest television violence can be correlated with children's behaviour. Joy, Kimball and Zabrack (1986) studied television viewing and children's aggressive behaviour in three Canadian towns. One town received only one channel, the second town received four channels and the third did not
have television until 1974. Children in the latter showed larger increases in aggression. This was attributed to the introduction of television into the community.

4 The impact of transnational broadcasting

Little research exists concerning the social and cultural impact of transnational television. Certainly, there are no findings to support the argument that Asia/Pacific cultures are under threat from the West as a direct result of transnational television.

Beng (1994) notes that there is no evidence that foreign media are either 'harmful or hegemonic': there is no proof of unassailable globalisation. Indeed, there is evidence for a preference of local content (Beng, 1994; Stewart, 1991) and, further, that television may actually strengthen local communities/identities (Beng, 1994). Schiller (in Beng, 1994, p.65) believes that whilst communities may be 'distracted' by foreign television this does not mean that they are influenced.

The debate over these effects has been equated with the argument about the impact of television violence upon audiences (Jacka, 1991). It is difficult to draw causal connections, and even more problematic to attempt to test this alleged causation. Collins (1991) goes so far as to state that it is difficult on either a macro or micro level to demonstrate any impact. It is obviously easier to
investigate the flow of foreign broadcasting, than it is to actually identify the effects of this flow (McQuail, 1994). Of course, the fact that it is difficult to demonstrate cause-effect relationships does not mean that there are no impacts.

A counter perspective is offered by Tomlinson in arguing that "cultural domination occurs when Third World governments fight a futile battle to preserve 'tradition' in the face of popular wellsprings of modernist energy" (in Wilson, 1993, p.56). Resisting cultural modernisation leaves Asia-Pacific countries vulnerable to westernisation; indigenous adaption of cultural modernisation would seem preferable to wholesale adoption of U.S. values and practices.

5 Transculturation and cultural resistance

McQuail (1994) uses the term 'transculturation' to describe the interchange between cultures. The expectation that satellite broadcast television will destroy indigenous cultures fails to acknowledge that other forms of communication between cultures existed prior to television. The fact that cultures survive such transculturation is evidence of cultural 'resistance' and 'adaption'. Collins (1991) discusses the relationship of U.S. culture and Canada's distinctive identity. The U.S. media has been involved in Canada for over 100 years, yet there has been a generalised resistance to the adoption of this foreign
culture. Similarly, it has been noted that television broadcasting has extended over national boundaries in Europe for some time (Jacka, 1990). As Europe currently resists attempts to create a regional identity, it would seem that this cultural invasion has failed to dramatically alter individual nationalities within the area.

Both McQuail (1994) and Ang (1991) discuss the ability of communities to redefine the material that is broadcast. Ang terms this process 'indigenisation' (1991, p.6). Audiences will interpret media messages in different ways, very much dependent upon their circumstances and positions in society on the basis of class, gender or ethnicity (Beng, 1994; Kishore, 1994; McQuail, 1994). Television audiences are, therefore, far from passive receivers and are capable of exercising choice and obtaining from media that which they deem useful. The high proportion of video players for the population (Plange, 1993) would seem to imply that Fijians at least are able to exercise their autonomy through a choice of what to watch. Of course, this choice only occurs within a broader context of the limitations of what the media do actually offer, and how this is framed.

Given that the urban middle classes are able to access STAR TV in many countries (Kishore, 1994), the broadcasters will be under pressure to ensure appropriate programming (McQuail, 1994). What is broadcast will need to be relevant and make sense to a broad audience rather than just American people. It is also argued that the growth in the number of
Asian journalists as foreign correspondents is encouraging a more Asian-centred interpretation of world events (Beng, 1994).

"Transculturation" can also describe the way in which the West appropriates aspects of other cultures (often under the guise of multiculturalism) for their own consumption (Ang, 1991, p.6). Ironically the middle classes in the West journey off to consume foreign movies (including many movies originating or concerning Asia), at the same time Asian peoples consume Hollywood movies. Australia offers a station dedicated to broadcasting foreign programs. Clearly, this use of material from other cultures can impact on western culture in much the same way that western culture can impact on other cultures.

6 Language and transnational television

From the figures for languages per country (Dixon, 1991), we can see that the Asia-Pacific region is extremely linguistically diverse. In the Philippines there are 60 million people speaking a total of 160 different languages. In pre-European Aboriginal Australia it is estimated that approximately 250 languages were spoken by between one and two million people. In Indonesia, excluding Irian Jaya, there are 350 languages spoken by a population of 180 million. In Irian Jaya alone 200 languages are estimated to be spoken by 1.6 million people. Throughout the Pacific islands, the population is estimated to be approximately 2
million with 260 different languages in use. And in Papua New Guinea there are 869 languages (Dutton and Muhlhausler, 1991) shared by an estimated population of just over 3.9 million. This linguistic diversity implies many different world-views and cultures, even within national boundaries.

In multilingual communities speakers utilise the various linguistic and cultural resources to express their identities. Clyne uses Haugen's term language ecology (Haugen, 1974) to express "the wholesomeness for the human environment of the maintenance (and development) of multilingualism" (Clyne, 1982, p.27). There are those who argue that linguistic diversity can be socially divisive and that it leads to inefficiency in communication. Certainly this linguistic diversity has been an important factor for limiting the spread of transnational broadcasting and advertising.

Unfortunately, many of the languages of the Asia-Pacific region are under threat, but not from transnational television. A major threat is the spread of English, which is seen to provide social mobility and improvement in employment prospects in the formal sector. Renck (1990) comments on the prevalence of this cargo cult attitude towards the learning of English in Papua New Guinea. But like so many other cargo cults, the learning of English and the education system generally have failed to deliver the desired goods to most Papua New Guineans (Swatridge, 1985).
Instead, it is the death of the indigenous languages which is delivered. Dixon points out that

as schooling, radio, television and other trappings of Western-style civilisation advance through New Guinea as they are likely to ... so perhaps 90 per cent of the languages will be threatened with extinction.

(Dixon, 1991, p.247)

7 Modernisation and television

McQuail (1992) comments that the arrival of television in the Asia-Pacific region is evidence of the impact of broader things. Obviously, the country requires a certain level of affluence to set up public television, and even more if it is to offer advertisers a sufficient market for the sale of their goods and services. The infrastructure needed to broadcast directly is costly, and whilst satellite broadcasting overcomes this in one sense, there still needs to be a relatively wealthy audience of consumers, and those able to afford the purchase of satellite dishes. It is in this way that modernisation can create the ‘audience’ for westernisation.

So, it is not satellite broadcasting which of itself is dangerous for indigenous languages and cultures. Rather it is the type of modernisation which precedes it. In Papua New Guinea, for example, modernisation is associated with: urbanisation, western education, western television programs
and advertising, and the use of English. It is this type of modernisation which is so dangerous for the indigenous languages and cultures of Papua New Guinea.

However, modernisation need not imply the above characteristics. Instead it can mean: rural development, bicultural education, indigenous production and control of television, and multilingualism. Modernisation of this type can support the ecological development of indigenous languages and cultures, and satellite broadcasting has an important role to play in this development.

8 Indigenous television: a case study

From 1982 to 1986, Eric Michaels studied the establishment of community television at Yuendumu - a remote Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory of Australia. As a result of his study Michaels believes that local production and transmission of video and television can be developed so as to conform to traditional Aboriginal values and to assist in language and culture maintenance programs (Michaels, 1986).

The Broadcasting for Remote Areas Communities Scheme (BRACS) was introduced in 1988 to give Aboriginal people in remote areas access to and control of local production and transmission of radio and television. The BRACS unit installed in each selected community comprises equipment to receive satellite broadcasts of public and commercial radio
and television and to re-broadcast it for up to 5 kilometres. The unit also has basic equipment for television and radio production.

Initially, the scheme was introduced with insufficient thought being given to the provision of training and other support for communities. Now, Bachelor College (an Aboriginal Tertiary education institution in the Northern Territory) offers culturally appropriate training to communities with BRACS equipment. According to Molnar, feedback from Aboriginal communities indicates that

Aborigines are enjoying seeing themselves positively portrayed and that Aboriginal programs in languages are in turn strengthening the culture and language.

(Molnar, 1990, p.154)

9 Concluding remarks

The social and cultural impact of satellite broadcast television is dependent upon the modernisation program within which it is located. Thus, if satellite broadcast television is introduced in the context of a modernisation program which is equated with westernisation, then transnational broadcasting is likely to reinforce that westernisation. However, by adopting a model with local access and control (of the sort intended by the BRACS initiative) satellite technology can be used to support the survival and development of indigenous cultures.
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