

Paper No. 9

PUBLIC SERVICE PROGRAMMING IN MALAYSIA: BACKGROUND, PRESENT STATUS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

By Professor R.Karthigesu
Universiti Sains Malaysia

Introduction:

Malaysia has been fortunate, much like many of its Southeast Asian countries, in enjoying vigorous economic growth all along the last decade. A combination of natural endowments, wise leadership and pragmatic economic policies, has brought about higher living standards for its people, to the extent that the country is confident enough to set a definitive target date, that is 2020, as the year in which it will attain developed status. All institutions in the country are driving themselves towards this goal. In this drive however, as it always happens when people pursue material wealth vigorously, some moral and social values are seriously challenged. Although the nation's 2020 vision stresses that progress should mean both material and spiritual, it appears, and it is already evident to some extent, that they both will be in conflict rather than in tandem in pursuing their goals.

This conflict does not spare the broadcasting institutions in the country. The broadcasting institutions are now at a point in which they have to identify and determine their future directions. But already they are far into the path of commodifying what used to be a public service. Where information and education used to be the primary agenda for broadcasting, that agenda is now more and more being replaced with entertainment and financial profit.

Broadcasting in Malaysia

Malaysia is a typical example of a former British colony going through its economic and social development stages since its independence in 1957. It was a country with rich natural resources of rubber, tin ore, tea and timber from

which Britain and its industries benefited enormously. But in the wind of independence that swept Asia, Britain had to leave.

Broadcasting (then only radio) was part of that power structure built and transferred to the new government and was designed to provide the same service that it provided for the colonial government, namely to safeguard and strengthen the authority of government. There was a strongly built-in partiality towards people and parties in power.

There wasn't a moment, of course, when any of the involved parties thought of transforming a "colonial service" model to an "independence service" model. Although in forming many of its civil institutions Malaysia emulated Britain, such as the monarchy and two houses of Parliament in the Westminster model and most government departments. However in setting-up the broadcasting institution it held on to the Colonial model, and Malaysia was not unique in doing so. India, Pakistan as well as Sri Lanka, all of which obtained their freedom earlier, did not do so either.

Television Malaysia was the creation of the independent government of Malaysia in 1963 and it was moulded in exactly the same way as Radio Malaysia. Six years of independence had not provided enough confidence or inspiration to institute a more open and liberal broadcast service. Fostering that attitude was the overhanging threat of armed Communist insurgency in the country which, although quelled earlier, had not been completely eliminated, and the "confrontation" with Indonesia over the formation of the Malaysian Federation, which kept the country under an emergency.

Television grew rapidly in the country, covering the urban centres and spreading to rural areas. Sets were affordable even to a substantial number of rural people and viewership rapidly grew. Today it is the foremost medium of entertainment and information in the country with 93% of the adult population of the country able to receive it.

Deregulation

The setting up of a commercial television network, TV3, in 1984, was a momentous decision that broke the government monopoly, by government's own volition, in broadcasting. It took courage on the part of the government to take such a step when most developing countries would not even consider it at that time.

But the government decision to allow a private company to operate a television network cannot be interpreted as a move to liberalise broadcast institutions. It appears that, first and foremost, it was an economically motivated decision. It was done in line with the privatisation of industries previously controlled by the government in order to provide growth and maximisation of profits. A second reason was to increase entertainment content of television in order to combat the proliferation of video recorders and video tape rentals. From a different perspective it can also be described as a way of capitalising on the hunger of the audience for varied entertainment which the official medium, under constraint by government policies, was not able to give.

Since deregulation came into effect, there has been much excitement both among the viewing public and entrepreneurs that broadcasting will grow in leaps and bounds. But fortunately the government has always been cautious and deliberate in allowing private broadcasters to operate. Although the abundance of television programming has been often talked about, only a trickle has arrived so far. Since the deregulation of broadcasting occurred in Malaysia, the only four significant events that have happened were the appearance of TV3 in 1984, Time Radio in 1994 Metrovision, the first subscription television, and Mega TV the first cable operator recently this year, the last two fledgling companies in the Capitol and yet to be nation-wide phenomena.

But the real mega event in Malaysia's television and telecommunications history is going to be the launching of Malaysia's own satellite, MEASAT, hopefully before the end of the year. When that event is completed, and with all the presently proposed TV channels fully operational, either by the end of 1996 or early 1997, we are told that Malaysia will have 29 TV channels, 18 of them subscription channels for international programming and 11 mainly local channel.

Government and Broadcasting Policy in Malaysia

The Broadcasting Act of 1988

For a long while since broadcasting began in Malaysia, the country did not have a broadcasting or communication policy specifically for that purpose. By statements from the department, as well as by the various ministers, we can conclude that the country's constitution, its laws, its so called ideology or the

Rukunegara and the New Economic Policy have served as the terms of reference for the conduct of its broadcasting. In that sense RTM's philosophy is identical to that of the government. For the first time a Broadcasting Act, passed in 1988, came into force in 1989. But the Broadcasting Act, just as other acts aimed at curbing freedoms of mass media institutions such as the Printing Presses and Publication Act (1984) or the Official Secrets Act (1972), merely stipulates the various restrictions and sanctions to expressions and squarely invests the authority of control of broadcasting institutions on the person of the Information Minister. The Act has since been used to control the number of TV and radio stations in operation as well as to control the number of hours that they can broadcast. Since the implementation of the Act only one radio broadcasting company and two TV broadcasting companies have been allowed to operate. Also at present requests for a 24-hour broadcasting by television stations has been denied and week-day television broadcasts have to end by midnight.

The punitive effect of the Broadcasting Act was felt for the first time in the country when the Minister invoked it to ban a TV3 live, and immensely lively, discussion programme, one that was stimulating and called "Teleskop", because of the use of a four-letter word by a participant. This was more a demonstration of the Minister's power rather than a rational use of the Act. All that was called for was only a chastising word to the producer to be more careful in future. Banning the programme was like burning down the house because of the presence of a rat.

The Environment of Competition

A decade ago, when private TV broadcasting was introduced, it was hoped that Radio TV Malaysia would remain perseverant to its goals of public service in providing information and education to its audience, unaffected by the glamour and glitter of commercialism of the private sector rivals. During the years before this competition began--and it is consistently claimed that this is still the case--RTM (Radio Television Malaysia), the government network, adhered to a policy that popularity was of less importance than serving and educating its audience in promoting the ideals of the Rukunegara (the national ideology) which exhorted the people to believe in God, be loyal to the King, obey and respect the constitution and be civil and disciplined.

Although like any other developing country, TV Malaysia carried an

enormous amount of imported programmes from the Western countries, predominantly from the Anglo world of United States, Britain and Australia, these programmes were carefully picked to avoid the excessive violence and sex elements, with which imported drama had become obsessed with, and many programmes were censored and any material suspected of corrupting values held in esteem by Malaysians were excised.

When TV3 entered the scene, it made it quite clear that its purpose was to enrich the entertainment content of Malaysian TV, but otherwise remain compliant to all government orders. It was more a corporate business than an agent for social change or development. It had to make money first and talk about social commitments later, if at all.

TV3 pursued an aggressive policy in buying newer and more expensive imported shows and scheduled them against TV Malaysia's usual fare. Of particular significance was its commitment to provide the potential advertisers the kind of programmes that could sell their products. For RTM this had not been a significant concern before because of its commitment to the national ideology and also because of the monopoly it enjoyed in television advertising. Within three years of its establishment, TV3 was able to overtake TV Malaysia in advertising revenue and frequently in viewership within the areas into which its transmission reached.

RTM's reaction to its losing popularity was swift and surprising. Going by the usual norms of a bureaucratic organisation, one would have expected RTM not to heed the challenges of the upstart TV3, maintaining that revenue and popularity were not what RTM, as a responsible national organisation, was after. After all its revenues were assured from the national treasury, which in turn collected all the license fees. But this was not to be so. RTM decided to hit back and compete with TV3 on its own ground. There is no doubt that for this it received the blessings of its political masters. Government, amidst a depressed economy, was also desperately looking into ways and means to increase revenue, and this attitude no doubt favoured RTM's profit-making spirit.

In January 1987 TV Malaysia introduced its bright new schedule, in which the significant departure from past practices, was to create a "Chinese belt" of serials imported from Hong Kong and Taiwan, directly opposite similar serials by TV3. A similar "Indian belt", of imported Tamil and Hindi movies, was also created.

Many other changes were made. RTM stopped broadcasting its main news bulletin simultaneously over both channels, confining the broadcast now to only RTM 1. Newer and more expensive shows, including many mini-series were imported. A movie slot was created for late evening viewing. The January 1987 audience figures showed that RTM had significantly improved its position. But TV3 has struck back. By April 1987 it introduced better Chinese programmes, moved the slot to a half hour earlier than RTM's "Chinese Belt" and had started to win back the viewers and advertisers' confidence. This see-saw trend had continued until today and no doubt will go on as long as this form of competition is encouraged by the government. It is an irony that in meeting the challenge for popularity posed by the new private channel, the government TV also decided to follow its example by opening itself up for intense commercialisation of its entertainment programmes, thus nullifying the propriety basic to public broadcasting. In fact RTM seemed to have abandoned its responsibility in closely controlling commercialisation mores on the airwaves, by vicariously adopting a more vigorous commercial slot sales by using other commercial companies. Since 1988 RTM has contracted out commercial airtime sales to several private companies who act as agents for the government organisation. Unfortunately such opening up of attitudes did not prevail in providing a more balanced news and information fare for its audiences. This seems to underline the fact that governments are quick to adopt a modernisation model, provided it does not threaten their authority, but nevertheless dilutes and corrupts the social atmosphere of the country. It is in the interest of safeguarding of the authority of the ruling government that the new Broadcasting Act has brought TV3 within the powers of the Minister for Broadcasting, enabling him to exercise his authority on its programming policies at will.

TV3, supposedly an independent agent, has also been highly influenced by these policies and had kept in step with government TV, perhaps even overdoing it a bit. Research on the news contents of both TV Malaysia and TV3 has shown that their approach and volume of news about government and ruling parties do not differ widely. For instance a comparison of content in the evening prime news of TV Malaysia and TV3 in 1988 showed that TV Malaysia (RTM) spent 7.1% of its total content reporting news on the country's chief executive while TV3 spent 9.3%, all of them favourable. Ruling parties accounted for 6.9% of the total content in TV Malaysia and 9.9% in TV3,

implicitly reflecting its close connections with the ruling parties. Among their local news, government as a category occupied the highest ranking of total news content, 65% in TV Malaysia and 42% in TV3. Current Status of Public Service Programming

The position of TV programming generally has not changed much from the early years of this competition although in one important respect it has. Television in Malaysia in its infancy and adolescence, inevitably depended on foreign programmes quite a lot. It drew sustenance throughout the growing years initially from Britain, and then increasingly from United States. Although the government cherished a dream of increasing local content in Malaysian television to at least 60%, since the time of Television Malaysia's inception its dependency on imported programmes, largely from United States, had been consistently close to 60%.

When in 1984, TV3 was introduced, the ratio actually worsened, since TV3, to capture an urban market, was allowed to broadcast up to 70% imported programmes. But in its thirties, television in Malaysia displays considerable maturity. Since the recent introduction of morning television in 1994, almost all of its local programmes, the proportion of local programmes have increased considerably. In March 1994 the average percentage of foreign programmes in Malaysian television had fallen to 49%, the first time that this has happened in its history.

Actually there is more to be said about these ratios than what the figures show. The foreign programme component includes a substantial amount of Chinese and Indian imports, culturally more relevant to the two main non-Malay ethnic communities in Malaysia. If a further breakdown is made to reflect these, then the average percentage of American & other English programmes for the three networks will reduce to 40% only.

Problems in Public Service Programming

a) Entertainment Predominance:

For any observer of the Malaysian television environment today the commercial character of the service will become quite palpable. Competition between the stations for audiences is so keen that, in that respect, the public service broadcaster, that is the government, is indistinguishable from its rivals.

Entertainment content predominates all channels and they are made-up of local musical extravaganza, pop music, dramas, and a substantial amount of important entertainment from the US., other English speaking world, as well as Hong Kong and India.

b) Advertising:

Competition for advertising revenue is also keen that almost all programme slots are now available for advertising. And advertising, although subject to various codes, is becoming dextrously clever in brainwashing people to convert into a consumer society.

It is unique to Malaysia that while cigarette as a product remains banned in mass media advertising, the brands themselves are allowed to be advertised in the guise of other products, and these brand advertising actually dominates TV advertising today.

Advertising, from appearing in the form of jingles, filmlets and sponsorship seemed to have graduated in becoming full-fledged programmes. It is now possible for companies to buy half-hour slots to advertise their wares relentlessly throughout the slot. While it is understandable that the private TV organisation does this because the advertiser is a subsidiary company of the TV organisation (nevertheless, a practice that tantamount to a commercial conspiracy), it is astonishing that the public broadcaster, in its zeal to copy money-making tactics from the private broadcaster should also sell out valuable airtime in this manner. This is no less than an abuse of an institution meant for public service supported by public funds.

The Downgrading of Non-formal Education and Information:

While there is some evidence that the absolute airtime for non-formal educational and informational material may have increased, particularly after the introduction of the early morning talk shows, it would seem that in relative terms they have deteriorated, and are tend to be placed at non-prime time or low-density viewing periods. Because of the pricing pattern of advertising slots, both the private and public broadcasters tend to banish mind-building serious material to slots that garner only minority viewers.

We should also take note that most of these serious documentaries are imported from the Western countries. Hong Kong, India and Indonesia, giants in

the entertainment film world, hardly turn their minds to producing educational documentaries.

Local Malaysian stations spend only a minimum amount of money into educational documentaries. Because local entertainment sells well (more so than foreign entertainment) investment into producing glittering local shows and dramas is high, and this has shown a dramatic improvement in the quality of these shows. Unfortunately the same enthusiasm does not prevail with expenditure for educational documentaries. Local organisations are satisfied with providing talk shows for their non-formal information, besides their traditional news production. If this state of affairs persists than Malaysia will ever be dependent on foreign documentaries for their mind-building material.

Future Prospects:

The Malaysian government does not seem to have a plan to improve public service broadcasting beyond its present thrust to popularise its own channels to rival the private channels. As more and more private channels come into play this competition is bound to heat-up and worsen the situation.

Some Suggestions:

I think Malaysian audiences as a whole can profit by some changes in the broadcasting environment in the country, for which the government has to be the chief initiator:

1. Malaysia needs to introduce an advertisement-free public channel for its more serious audiences who are not interested in the crass materialism exhibited by Malaysian television as a whole now. This channel should be the only one supported by the annual license fee from the people. The channel may solicit and receive funds from commercial organisations, but should only acknowledge the contribution, not advertise in return. The channel should be fully devoted to non-formal education, information and cultural entertainment. The policy-making body should be independent of government, although the production and dissemination of independent news and views and release these from government-bias as prevalent now.

2. The Broadcasting Act should be amended to more fully define the

responsibility of the private broadcasters including mandating certain amount of public service programming in their airtime and prescribing a portion of their profit to be spent on educational documentaries.

3. The present government channels can be fully privatised to legitimise the kind of competition they have entered into now. They should not be endowed with public grants anymore.

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