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SERVE THE PUBLIC INTEREST?'  
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'Public Service Broadcasting : Sustainability in the new media order'

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## 1 Introduction

There would be little point in holding this seminar if it not been possible to express the theme in a positive way. Mrs Thatcher was famously quoted as saying 'There is no such thing as society', but on the whole people in Britain did not believe her. In asking the question, - how can broadcasters can best serve the public interest?, - we are accepting that there is such a thing as the public interest. Public service broadcasters are expected to be specifically to be guardians of that interest. But the question is addressed not just to those who are described as public service broadcasters but to broadcasters as a whole.

In this session we are looking at ways in which public service broadcasting can be sustained in the crowded local and global media scene. Because of where we are, in the Indian capital, and the common interest of AMIC and the CBA in the region, the context is an Asian one though the question is much wider. My own background until five years ago was with trans-national broadcasting, specifically BBC World Service radio, broadcasting to the countries of south Asia. Over the past eighteen months I have been working with my former BBC colleague Dr David Page under the auspices of the Institute of Development Studies in the University of Sussex, on a project to look at the impact of the new broadcasting media on India Pakistan Bangladesh Nepal and Sri Lanka. This 'Media South Asia' project has involved a small team of researchers journalists and broadcasters from the region. So my paper draws on the ideas and insights of the several hundred people in the media, in government, public business and academic life in the south Asian region we have talked to in the course of the project. We have been focussing on practical and policy issues to do with broadcasting, public and private as well as more theoretical and analytical questions posed by academics and media observers have about the cultural and political impact of the global media environment. Discussion groups conducted for the project have also been a source of ideas, as well as what media observers and policy makers have written or said where the issues are being public debated.

In this paper I aim to look first at the threats to public service broadcasting in a multi-channel international media environment; secondly suggest the strengths and potential strengths of those who have traditionally been seen or have wished to be seen as the guardians and practitioners of public service broadcasting, and look at ways in which broadcasters and policy makers are looking to build on those assets. By this I mean for the most part the national broadcasters, who until the advent of international satellite channels had the Television field to themselves. Thirdly I look at some the strengths of private channels as compared with state broadcasters; and finally suggest ways in which the values and interests

of both public and private broadcasters may converge in the new media environment.

## 2. Threats to public service broadcasting

What are often perceived as threats to public service broadcasting can also be regarded as positive opportunities, and have in many cases been taken as such. They come from technological changes which make previously existing practices obsolete, from social and cultural changes linked to economic liberalisation, and the inheritance of the broadcasting institutions themselves.

Some of the threats - or opportunities - are the product of real changes, others perhaps just of a different way of looking things. Advances in technology have changed broadcasting from an activity using a scarce resource - the frequency spectrum - to one where the means of dissemination give more capacity than the broadcasters can use. But that does not mean that anyone who wants to has access to the media, even those with something important or interesting to say.

In countries like those of south Asia where broadcasting had been a government monopoly from the start, the loss of the monopoly is a real change. The national broadcaster has not necessarily been just the voice of the government, though attempts to change that aspect of the colonial legacy has met with only limited success. Nor could it claim to be the voice of the people, which is surely too big a claim to make for any broadcaster. But the national broadcaster has always been expected in some sense to be the voice of the nation. In the early years after independence in India Pakistan and Sri Lanka broadcasters saw themselves as engaged in a political building project, helping to construct the idea and identity of the nation.

Theorists characterised it as a representation of a dominant ideology. The central role of state power is non negotiable. The state is seen as the one institution which affects the life and welfare of every one within its borders. Its responsibilities stretch so wide that no other private or public institution can pretend to match it. Even if the idea of the state - and of the alternative concept of civil society - was seen as some extent the product of a consensus, the state media played a dominant role in the production of that consensus. This belief was combined with a tendency to believe in the omnipotence of the mass media. This role of nation- building has not by any means been abandoned. In Britain it was required of the BBC in the 1920s and 1930s; it is a requirement in Canada. Governments and the public are particularly sensitive to this role in a time of military conflict. But to some observers it seems dated and certainly arouses suspicion as a government-directed enterprise. In India the idea still has strong advocates, but some will argue that the nation building project was important at the time of independence but should not be a priority today. Some editors and political observers argue that the job has been done effectively, and that what is required today is something different reflecting the pluralism and diversity of the nation. Others, aware of the fragility that goes with the diversity, reject that view. But in general broadcasters are more cautious about claiming the role of voicing a national consensus, and societies are less certain what it is they want.

Rival political loyalties and distinct community and class identities in any nation make for

many voices clamouring to be heard. Even before the state broadcasting monopoly was broken the idea of determining who speaks for a nation was crystallised in the concept of an autonomous broadcaster. After years of public debate India made its first pitch with the Prasar Bharati Act, passed with all party support in 1990. By the time the act was brought into force seven years later the whole broadcasting media environment had changed. Yesterday's key question - autonomy or not? - had been replaced with a new set of questions which needed new answers. Twenty years of debate on the place of broadcasting in society had been wrong footed.

The satellite television phenomenon in south Asia was a product of a new economic environment. It catered to a new kind of audience, restricted at first but growing rapidly, which was defining itself in the wake of the wider economic policy changes. Among the south Asian countries, Sri Lanka had taken the lead in economic liberalisation. But it was the Indian middle class consumer market, opened up by the economic reforms of the early 1990s that created the real market in the region. Television advertising became the motor of a broadcasting revolution.

The new realities undermined the financial basis of the existing system. Even before the satellite channels had begun to establish themselves as in serious competition for a mass audience Doordarshan was being pushed into paying its way. Until colour television became widely available in towns and cities throughout the country, television had hardly been considered as an advertising medium. With the creation of a national TV network in the early 80s Indian advertisers would capitalise on Doordarshan's extensive reach. Marketing became the skill for the nineties, though the national broadcaster was unpractised in marketing skills. Initially there was a steep and in many ways very successful learning curve.

Doordarshan had a major advantage both as the sole operator of a terrestrial channel, and with its own satellite network of regional language services. But some of the private satellite channels have been catching up. They have their own pitfalls and uncertainties. Few of them are profitable. Despite a relative decline in relation to the private satellite channels ( in areas where they are accessible) India's national broadcaster is far from written off. But for Doordarshan as for other national broadcasters in south Asia some repositioning seems to be inevitable.

At one level the sustainability of public service broadcasting depends on the ability to support it financially. The problem of funding for public service broadcasting is contentious and dominates every area of debate. Many would attach primary importance to public broadcasting as a service of education and information, with a key part to play in national development. For them, funding ranks with health and basic formal education as a high priority for a full state subsidy. At the opposite end are those who argue that the market is the best judge of what the public wants and needs, and that broadcasting does not need state funds. Not many professionals or politicians in south Asia take that view. In most south Asian countries public broadcasting is financed at least in part by a license fee - India and Nepal are exceptions. In West Bengal the ruling Communist Party (Marxist) suggested a form of public funding for Prasar Bharati, for which tenders or shares could be floated, to supplement a government subsidised trust fund. A specialist committee in India in 1996 recommended the restoration of a license fee, or a one off tax on the sale of new television sets. Many broadcasters are in favour. The public does not seem to be averse to idea. At a

group discussion organised as part of the Media South Asia project, a group of ex-soldiers in the north Indian town of Mathura told us that they were ready to pay license fees in the range of Rs 200-Rs 500 a year if they were assured of meaningful and useful programming. But no such proposal is on the political agenda, as the government fears that it would be a political embarrassment.

However the belief that there is an inherent conflict between providing public service programmes and getting or giving commercial support is no longer assumed by public service broadcasters around the world. In Japan, NHK preserves its tradition of avoiding commercial involvement. The BBC, though it does not take advertisements in its domestic programming, has embraced commercial practices enthusiastically in other areas. In practice the solution to funding is a mixture of sources; with a license fee or a subsidy, subscriptions and commercial revenues balanced in a way that satisfies the government the public and the other intermediate stakeholders in broadcasting.

Since the end of the monopoly, for some politicians and officials there is a straightforward answer to the question what should be done about the national broadcaster? It is that technological advances and commercial competition are now providing a platform for alternative voices, and as lively source of entertainment. It is therefore unnecessary for the national broadcaster to be either autonomous or comprehensive in its coverage. According to this argument autonomy without financial self sufficiency is in any case an unreal objective. The government has responsibilities in south Asian societies which go far beyond that of any other single institution. Its activities cover every facet of social and cultural need. The government needs its own channel. The national broadcaster can now concentrate on performing this role.

However this apparently simple prescription begs the question as to whether public service broadcasting in the wider sense - not just officially sponsored information - is sustainable in the new media order. Whether or not a TV or radio channel is effectively operated by government, the way in which the government presents its own policies, and the publicity it gives to its own initiatives is bound to have a major influence on the media. Beyond that the responsibility and power of governments to establish a framework for national communications and broadcasting is accepted virtually everywhere. It is not in itself incompatible with freedom of speech or other constitutionally protected rights. In most south Asian countries the public media have been or are used by governments for partisan purposes. So the public is as sceptical about governments exercising the public service broadcasting role in their name as they are about private channels.

The sustainability of public service broadcasting and the institutions which can promote it, depends as much on enlightened regulation as on an absence of regulation. But it cannot be sustained if there is no new thinking about what its aims and content should be. The state broadcasters in south Asia have been seen as a vehicle for public messages formulated by government departments to back up their policies. With frequently changing and unstable governments money spent on such information campaigns may be totally wasted. Development programmes made to support one government's policies have been dropped when a new government came because they were out of date. In an ideological climate where the role of the state is being cut back, a reduction in officially sponsored information programmes, unimaginatively produced, may be considered no great loss.

But it is a misconception to see this as the main substance of public service broadcasting which demands (to quote a British formulation of the 1980s) - 'knowledge culture criticism and experiment'. A regard for the public interest and the institutional means to support it is as necessary in an era of multiple choice as it was in the monopoly era. What is true for other areas of economics and social welfare is true of broadcasting. This is the argument that needs to be made.

### 3 Strengths of the Public Broadcasters

The infrastructure of broadcasting built up over more than seventy years represents a large public capital asset and national investment, managed by the state broadcaster on behalf of the state. In India it is estimated to be worth Rs55.000 crores (US\$13 bn). The reach of the terrestrial television service covers 86% of the population. No private broadcaster could begin to match Doordarshan for size or reach. Nor would he wish to match the weight of administrative and staff costs that come with it. The challenge for the public broadcaster is to make the best use of these capital assets on behalf of the public.

But the new media environment also offers the public broadcaster opportunities for encouraging high standards in programme making and scheduling, by its own staff and by the independent producers from whom it commissions programmes. The state broadcaster can promote the growth of an independent sector, - a new dimension in broadcasting, both in radio or in television. Where the public broadcaster is the host to private stations using its own facilities, as All India Radio and Radio Nepal have been, this also demands a judgement as to what kind of programming should be expected from the private broadcasters. Alternatively the technical infrastructure of national broadcasting can be regarded as a public asset which should be allocated for use by an independent regulatory body. Institutions are inclined to protect their own interests and perhaps are not the best arbiters of the terms on which their competitors can operate.

The setting of quality standards whether in the technical or programme area seems to be both a regulatory and a public service broadcasting function. If only as a practical measure technical specifications have to be set by a body authorised by the state to allow the hardware manufacturers and dealers to know what market they are operating in. They may also be subject to both international negotiation, which is the prerogative of a state - or if there is a free market they may be preempted by proprietary technology, not necessarily in the public interest. The state broadcaster also has an important role to play in setting standards of technical excellence.

Part of the obligation that a public service broadcaster in the European tradition assumes is to provide universal accessibility. The single minded pursuit of a niche market is not a long term option as it is for the private channels. For the national broadcaster it is an important and defining difference, But increasingly the national broadcaster may find that it is part of its role to be prepared to share the technical infrastructure with private companies. When the sharing involves a service which is not in competition with broadcasting, like the AIR use of its extensive and underused FM network for a radio paging service, the additional revenue raised gives a welcome boost to a shrinking government subsidy. The Sri Lankan government has permitted private FM stations to broadcast in Colombo with their own

studios and transmission facilities. But the most effective sites and most powerful transmitters for island-wide reception are reserved for SLBC as the state broadcaster. In Pakistan the semi government second channel Shalimar TV is not allowed to have a national network. In India the idea, which is being implemented in Bangladesh, of sanctioning a second terrestrial network in the private sector has been seen by governments as a bridge too far.

But official committees in India have encouraged the idea of local television within a national framework. The draft Broadcasting Bill also included much more liberal provisions for the establishment of non-commercial local and community radio stations. The CEO of Prasar Bharati SSGill, before he was removed last year by the present BJP-led government, had given the go-ahead for a community station to be piloted in Karnataka. Local organisations such as universities and agricultural institutes, NGOs and other organisations may be empowered to produce development oriented programmes. The Mass Communication and Research Centre at Jamia Millia near Delhi is equipped with studios from which they could broadcast locally once permission is given. Real measures of decentralisation such as these could become an effective means of development communication and community activity, and they have aroused great interest among development organisations in India. But decentralisation has been slow to come to state broadcasting organisations in south Asia. A large and commercially successful regional centre of Doordarshan such as Chennai, has won more space for regional news programmes originated in Tamil. But central control is the norm, inevitably so in the smaller countries - Sri Lanka Bangladesh and Nepal. There are more Tamil newsreaders in Delhi than in Madras. In Pakistan too both national and regional language bulletins are often originated from the capital. There is nothing specific in India's Prasar Bharati Act to suggest or require greater decentralisation, though a senior member of the original Board George Verghese argues that it was very much 'in the spirit of the Act'.

Reliability and quality of reception - a key public service objective - is also commercially a selling proposition. Advertisers and sponsors will only pay for programmes that can be seen. Where cable is a mass distribution system as it has become in India the state broadcaster is in the same position as other channels in wanting to ensure that its programmes are relayed in good quality. In India it has the law on its side. But as Doordarshan has discovered the provision that cable channels must carry at least two of its channels in the packages they offer their clients does not ensure the quality they are looking for.

Programme standards can be regulated in a negative way as governments do. Guidelines can be set as to the type of programming expected; - educational informational and cultural. But the quality of programmes is not an abstract or a bureaucratic concept. It arises from perceptions of what has been done and what can be done. It is a product of a climate in which creativity is encouraged. It is almost by definition dependent on a high degree of autonomy. Public service broadcasters have to justify their management strategies not by their prospectus but by the quality of the programmes on their schedule. Watchability is a part of the test, but popularity is not achieved by appealing to the lowest common denominator. The benchmark is the programme that has something to communicate and does so in an interesting way.

The monopoly of state broadcasters on locally originated news and current affairs survived for a few years after the satellite invasion. The private Hindi and south Indian language channels were initially seen as purely devoted to entertainment. But within the past three years the barriers have been comprehensively breached. Both Star TV and Zee TV now carry news coverage more widely watched throughout south Asia than established international channels such as BBC or CNN. Star's coverage of the India election in 1998 won particular admiration.

Doordarshan had responded to the challenge first of the video news magazines and then of the satellite channels by commissioning current affairs programmes from outside producers. They were previewed and pre-censored, making real problems in keeping a fast-moving story up to date. But they enhanced Doordarshan's credibility, the more so when Prasar Bharati was created in 1997 and the pre-viewing requirement was lifted. The expertise in independent TV journalism brought in from the print media and fostered in the state channel became a resource for the whole industry to draw on.

The greater openness combined with Doordarshan's reach and the fact that it was the first in the field has meant that it has gone some way to repairing the confidence that audiences want to have in the national broadcaster. Commercially successful regional centres of Doordarshan particularly in the south see themselves as much in competition with the national network for the audience's attention as with the private channels. By extending the scope of regional language news and current affairs programmes the state broadcaster can claim to be meeting a real public need. Strong regional centres such as Chennai have put sustained pressure on Doordarshan to give more time to locally originated news bulletins, and they attribute to this their own ability to win and retain audience loyalty. Calcutta has been less successful. From within the regional centre a policy of commercialisation is seen to have led to news and current affairs programmes and other public interest programmes have lost out to 'mindless' popular serials. Other programmes that would have added value to an overall public service programming policy have been eased out. This has been despite the Bengali audience's interest in news current affairs. The state has been governed continuously for over 20 years by a communist-led coalition opposed to the government in Delhi. Throughout this time the Calcutta station of Doordarshan has faced the problem of producing a balanced news bulletin. The regional news units have usually been headed by officials from the government information service who (in the view of a local news editor) '... have no stake or involvement in news and ... cannot take the risk of changing the system and upgrading news format or editorial policy.'

Once liberated from an agenda dictated by the ministry and the government of the day a state broadcaster has considerable advantages as a provider of news. The network of correspondents across India is a resource which the private news providers cannot match. In its central news coverage Doordarshan has implemented successful reforms in response to the challenge of satellite competition. The belief that the state broadcaster has irredeemably lost credibility is disputed vigorously not only by the state broadcasters themselves but by other independent observers in the media. Since the formation of Prasar Bharati independent producers working on news and current affairs programmes on Doordarshan channels have been operating in a changed environment. Pre-censorship of news and current affairs programmes was lifted by Prasar Bharati's Chief Executive Officer SS Gill almost from the first day of his tenure.

In Pakistan where the state broadcaster does not have autonomy there has been a rethinking of the state broadcaster's approach to news; selective certainly, but not so openly distorted or mis-stated as had been previously accepted when the state television channels enjoyed a monopoly. The present Minister of Information, former journalist and editor Mushahid Husain, acknowledges that in Pakistan TV as a medium was 'too politically closed', pointing to the minimal amount of time given to Nawaz Sharif on the TV news when he was leader of the Opposition. His own initiatives have been aimed to improve the image of the state channel, but do not diminish the reality of government control. Delegation of control over the news has been off limits whichever party is in power.

The act of broadcasting outside the country through the international channel PTV World, to an expatriate Pakistani audience which has access to other sources of information, itself argues for a more mature approach. Pakistani television journalists given the opportunity are well equipped to provide. PTV shows national news and privately produced current affairs programmes back to back in its own schedules. There is a contrast in styles but no monopoly of cultural authenticity in the representation of the world as seen from Pakistan. Pakistani entrepreneurs, planners and executives for private channels, identify the national interest with an opportunity to project an independent Pakistani point of view and cultural perspective. Independent entrepreneurs have their own views about the identity and self perception of their potential audience which they see as valid for a substantial part of Pakistani society even if it challenges orthodoxies promoted by the state. Some have brought their extensive experience of state broadcasting to the new diverse media environment just as in India the private channels have brought in both managers and broadcasters at the most senior level to direct their own news and programme schedules. There is a clear sharing of public service perceptions and objectives and cross fertilisation of ideas, which as the commercial channels have matured is a very encouraging feature the media scene in south Asia.

Public broadcasters have enormous assets to bring to this new environment. Their reach gives them exclusive access to the national audience. Their style and standards of presentation provide a touchstone for the development of both national and regional languages. The network of broadcasting staff throughout the country provides the basis for a nation-wide news gathering organisation. If good journalistic practice is grafted on to what might otherwise be merely a government information network, the diversity and relevance of the state broadcaster's news and its access to news sources would be difficult for a private broadcaster to rival. Its political importance and status is not dependent on the ratings which give the commercial stations their legitimacy and a claim to be heard. The public subsidy for the state broadcaster creates an obligation to create a comprehensive service for all sections of the community which the private broadcasters are under no obligation to share. This expectation is itself an asset in a medium which may otherwise predominantly have been seen as primarily for entertainment.

As a monopoly the state channel was the only available choice for the advertiser. In the new environment Doordarshan enjoys a major advantage as a vehicle for promoting widely used low value consumer goods. But the information from Doordarshan's own market research department rightly or wrongly seems to be largely discounted by the agencies responsible for media planning. Common standards for gathering information about the audience would make big contribution to understanding to increasing the range and to reducing duplication of

information. The expansion of market research under the impact of television advertising has been a striking feature of the growth of the media in the satellite decade. State broadcasters have been poor at marketing but have been successful commercially, even if they have given ground to satellite competition. Bangladesh television basks in the credit of a financial surplus even if they are severely limited in the way they can use the resources they have generated. But as comparisons are being made surely it is in the interests both of the state and the private broadcasters to know as much about their audience and the response to their programmes as can be known. There is so much expertise in Doordarshan and AIR in audience research and the range of the sources they draw on for information has been geographically and numerically wider than the commercial research organisations. Doordarshan has resisted joining in a common system of ratings which could be a standard for the broadcasting industry. Researchers in the commercial sector regret this. While the state broadcaster represents a majority of television viewers this standoffishness on their part is perhaps understandable, but it surely will not remain so for long.

### 3 Strengths of Private channels

The international channels initially provided a sharp contrast to the state broadcasters. They brought professionalism and production values to which the state broadcasters had not found a distinctive alternative. News and information channels such as CNN and the BBC practised a style of television journalism that was more open, less deferential and above all more visually interesting than the state broadcasters. The BBC as a news and information channel puzzled Indian viewers who expected drama or comedy programmes of a kind that over the years had been shown on Doordarshan. Some criticised the frequent repetition of news items and programmes in a 24 hour schedule. For the most part they were not focussed at first on a national or regional news agenda, before both CNN and the BBC began to develop programmes for the Asian audience. But it was the entertainment channels with films, lively programme formats for variety and chat shows, song shows and quizzes made the bigger popular impact. American serials such as Santa Barbara and The Bold and The Beautiful on Star TV won a fascinated and sometimes appalled audience for while, but the language barrier limited their appeal. Zee TV in Hindi crossed that barrier and did much more to stimulate the growth of the cable network and a mass audience. In Bangladesh, where a cable network only began to develop later, the most popular channels were those in the Star and Zee Groups, sports on ESPN, Sony Entertainment TV, and the relatively universal appeal to children of the Turner TNT Cartoon network. Cable channels are thought to have the advantage of a more interesting presentation and for dealing with contemporary issues. But more than half of those questioned for the Media South Asia project in a urban mini-survey in Bangladesh had difficulties with the cable output. They expressed concern over its effects as an alien influence on national culture, over its sexual suggestiveness, or for being dominated by commercial interests. Bangladesh TV on the other was praised for its reflection of national culture, its drama and its relevance to Bangladeshi problems. News was consistently popular despite 75% of the same sample not finding BTV news to be credible.

Much of the success of private international satellite channels has been attributed to the failures of state broadcasters. They could not meet the objectives that they had set themselves and the expectations of the public they are meant to serve. The initial official reaction in India was that the channels were illegitimate and should be banned. Once the impracticality of such a measure had been recognised, the state broadcasters realised that they

would have to defend their position by their own ability to provide what the audience was looking for, more effectively and to more people than their commercial rivals. To their critics Doordarshan appeared to abandon its public service remit in pursuit of its commercial and revenue aims.

In March 1996 the Indian government set up an expert committee to recommend the adoption of suitable marketing strategies for All India Radio and Doordarshan. The committee took as its premise the belief that commercial objectives - the driving principle of the private channels - could be made to serve public service aims. The idea that the established public broadcaster might have something to learn from its commercial rivals would not stand up if the commercial channels were believed to be inferior in every way.

What the private channels did bring was an openness to new ideas. Pressure from advertisers meant that they had to be concerned as to whether people were watching or not. Their recruitment and staffing was not distorted by the need to provide employment or to satisfy a politician's need for patronage. Bureaucratic obstacles were fewer. The private channels could be brokers for new ideas both for programmes and production values, and a conduit for new incentives for producers. Their international links could be a source of intrusive cultural influence but it could also be a professional asset, a means of extending practical technical support, and a way of disseminating 'professional' production values. The media planning that the private channels spawned by giving the advertisers a choice, led to questions being asked of the medium as a whole as to who was watching and when. Market research led to a lot more being known about the audience, to the benefit of the industry as a whole, including the public broadcaster.

#### **4 Common values**

In this final section I would like to suggest ways in which the values and interests of both public and private broadcasters may converge in the new media environment.

The importance which private channels have come to attach to their news services may indicate their own political agenda or need for visibility to advance other corporate aims. Some of the Indian channels have open political affiliations. But there is a sensitivity to political bias on the part of the audience which applies to all channels. TV journalists are judged by journalistic criteria and professional standards; their own professional reputations are at stake, and they can carry them from one channel to another, public or private. It should be in the interest both of the public and private broadcaster to have an objective standard by which they can expect their credibility can be judged.

The extent to which private channels might be willing to accept public service obligations is rightly questioned. But when public service objectives are seen as being an obligation to provide quality programming to suit a wide variety of tastes, to challenge and promote debate about relevant social issues, they can be seen as common to both public and private broadcaster. This is the case in Bangladesh where both the government and the private sector have been closely involved in programming for development programmes. The development agencies have made active use of audio visual techniques and have influenced official policy, though not as broadcasters themselves.

By inviting submissions for a license to operate a second terrestrial channel the Bangladesh government was able to set the terms for a private broadcaster, and to decide what kind of channel it wanted. It would thereby retain control as a regulator and reinstate its own relevance as a patron of Bangladeshi cultural autonomy, which had been openly bypassed by the foreign satellite channels.

The prospectus of the successful applicant - Ekushey TV- was couched in terms that are wholly appropriate to a public service broadcaster. Its 'mission statement' promises a range of programming that will at all times uphold the values and ideals of public service broadcasting. The aims of the channel are stated to be to provide information education and entertainment; it stresses a commitment to innovative quality programme-making and to the welfare and culture of Bangladesh, and to cooperation rather than competition with the state broadcaster. The prospectus argued that the requirements and objectives of advertisers all point to quality and choice as the key to success.

Since February 1998 (when that prospectus was written) two Bengali language satellite channels have started, (ATN Bangla and ATV), while Zee TV's Bengali language channel was closed after a nine month experiment. It is debatable whether the interest of advertisers in quality programmes rather than large audiences has been convincingly demonstrated. But the wide reach of a private terrestrial channel is attractive to advertisers. It should make it economically more feasible for the entrepreneurs to provide a schedule of better quality, more of a public service.

Other applicants or potential applicants for the Bangladesh license were defining their aims in terms of building a channel around hard news, or the projection and promotion of the values of civil society based on the interests and objectives of the non-government development agencies. A common factor seemed to be the need for a Bangladeshi channel to be technologically forward looking and wide open to international cultural influences. Some of those who have been considering involvement either in a terrestrial or satellite channel were critical of existing programming. As far as satellite was concerned one leading editor felt that government approval was barely relevant as it was equally convenient to uplink from outside the country as from within it. The same man pointed to suppressed latent creativity in BTv and promised contrast rather than cooperation with the government channel. Another identified a Bengali tradition of egalitarianism and non-conformism as defining cultural traits of Bangladesh, distinguishing it from North India. In arguing that these cultural characteristics left little room for worry about morals and Islamic values, he was putting forward a perspective on the Bangladesh national ethos and sense of identity which contrasted sharply with that of the official media .

These formulations show if nothing else that the discipline of presenting a case to a licensing authority generates ideas about public service and public acceptability for a private television channel, which many of those actually in operation have not succeeded in achieving.. Among the Indian channels only TV- I or Business India Tv as it was originally called started with such high public service ideals; and it has maintained them despite daunting financial problems which led critics prematurely to write it off. The priorities of most of the Hindi satellite channels lay elsewhere but have not excluded public service objectives. Sony Entertainment TV started with the single minded objective of ensuring its presence on the first eight or ten channels of the prime band in India's all-important cable systems. On the assumption that Hindi films attracted TV audiences the channel undertook research to

identify the most popular Hindi movies of each of the past 30 years and to buy rights to them. Sony successfully established themselves as an essential bloom in the cable bouquet throughout north and western India, even when only a dozen channels were on offer. From that base Sony gradually aimed to consolidate its position as a more mature channel, less film based, with some original programming, and stimulated by the elections of 1998 with an element of current affairs. Financially its success among Hindi channels has been second only to that of Zee TV.

Sony presents itself as highly receptive to whatever regulatory controls may be required. In contrast to Star TV Sony avoids active and public lobbying on broadcasting issues but acknowledges that it can make its views known through Japanese diplomatic channels. Its chief executive Kunal Das Gupta points out that the Japanese broadcasting scene is much more regulated than India's is now or is likely to be. Socially relevant broadcasting is very much on Sony's agenda, part of what he calls their developmental process. They are 'seriously looking at programmes which will deal with issues'.

Bhaskar Majumdar Corporate Vice president of Zee Telefilms argues that a private channel can talk of public service broadcasting only if there is a level-playing field. Most private broadcasters would be willing to submit to a requirement that they should keep say a two hour slot each day for public broadcasting. But he argues that for that to happen a clear distinction should be made between public and private broadcasting in the kind of programmes that they put on and the advertising that they aim for. The core of the argument is that the public service broadcaster should opt out of popular entertainment programming. The argument is often used by the BBC, that a universal license fee would become wholly untenable, if the public broadcaster were to ignore a major part of the interest of its mass audience. In India and Nepal where there is no license fee, broadcasting is subsidised from general taxation. Some officials might otherwise accept that Doordarshan could withdraw from popular entertainment programmes. But they would not feel justified in giving up the revenue that a popular programme with a national terrestrial audience can attract; and at present only the state broadcaster -with a terrestrial monopoly - can deliver such an audience. And as long as cable and satellite are accessible only to a minority of television set owners, it is acknowledged that the terrestrial audience has a right to an entertainment element in its schedules. And to abandon entertainment it would imply a contempt for popular culture on the part of the state broadcaster. It would exclude it from the opportunity to play a role in an aspect of contemporary society that the television medium serves especially well, leaving the benchmarks and standards to be set by the market alone.

There has been much criticism of the extent to which public broadcasters have been revising their programme concepts and formats in the interest of raising advertising revenues. Doordarshan has been a focus of such criticism in India and in Sri Lanka Rupavahini and ITN have started producing more commercially oriented entertainment programmes, The opposite trend has been less credited - the extent to which private channels have sensed an audience saturation with the sameness of film based programmes and have sought to enlarge and enrich their own schedules. In Sri Lanka while MTV (Maharaja TV not the Bombay based international music station) , TNL and Swarnavahini are re-orienting some of their programming to take on a more public service guise. In some respects they are judged to have been doing this sometimes more successfully than SLRC and ITN ever did.

Some forceful criticisms of the public service record of Sri Lankan broadcasting have been expressed by Sri Lankan observers. In a discussion programme aired last October the DG of SLBC suggested in response to comments by a prominent Buddhist monk on the corrupting effects of television, that.. 'one way of dealing with this would be for the public to boycott television and radio companies that broadcast programmes that promote the devaluation of our culture'. He stressed the need for broadcasters to produce programmes which are an alternative to the poor quality, obscene, programmes available today.

Public service broadcasting values and standards are also seen in Sri Lanka as an issue of human rights. In 1993 the human rights organisation Article 19 concluded after interviews with the then Chairmen of the three state-owned broadcasting institutions, ARTICLE 19 concluded that there was little concept of a public service duty of broadcasting in these institutions. The chairmen rejected the argument that there was a need for the broadcast of informed debate and criticism about government policy, as an instrument of democratic monitoring. Sri Lanka broadcasting was seen as "too young" to cover such debates at present.

There have been big changes in Sri Lanka since then and there have been forceful public debates on media issues. But some Sri Lankan critics still question whether SLRC and ITN – who share the television license fees on an 75:25 ratio between them – adequately fulfil their "public service" role. And with eight independent television operators and four independent radio operators in a limited advertising market, the competition between licensed private channels is tough. No quality thresholds have been imposed. One media critic acknowledges that '..political debates on television will be a popular entertainment format in the years to come. They are rude and crude – a lot of flash about them, and energy. People enjoy the cut and thrust of the debates.' But he concludes that they won't illuminate political problems, which must be one aim of a public broadcasting service. A similar question might be and is asked of the interviews and discussion programmes on Indian channels.

The developing possibilities of cross border broadcasting are creating common interests between commercial and public service broadcasters, both in programme making and scheduling. The Star News channel, though seen as an Indian product has an audience across the subcontinent. Zee Tv has created a new subcontinent wide market for Hindi language programming which has become a powerful instrument of cultural influence, and a common experience of the media across national borders in India Nepal Pakistan and Bangladesh. South Indian Tamil channels are watched in Sri Lanka. The Doordarshan Bengali language channel DD7 has high ratings in Bangladesh and has generated interest among Bangladeshi advertisers. The private satellite channel ATN Bangla also has an arrangement with a Calcutta based Indian company- CKT Inn- which has bought six hours of time through which they beam programmes to the West Bengal audience. Both the channel and the Calcutta company are said to be making money. In a television environment dominated by Hindi language programmes which have made big inroads in West Bengal this platform for local culture, even 'bad' local culture, is creating a new and challenging scenario to which the state broadcaster is bound to respond.

Other kinds of institutional partnership are also being forged between the private and public

sector. Asianet has established both a TV network and a cable distribution system in Kerala which has broken new ground both for television in the Malayalam language and a new model of institutional and technical cooperation with a public company - not the state broadcaster in this case but the Kerala State Electricity Board.

The pervasive centralisation of the Doordarshan culture acts as a brake on effective local initiatives. A senior state broadcaster told us in Madras of his belief that the south Indian satellite channels would never have made such an impact if the Madras centre of Doordarshan had been given its head to originate and develop more diverse Tamil language programming. As it is he argued programme innovations on Doordarshan are picked up and used by the satellite channels. The number of serials dubbed from Hindi could have been reduced. And there could be more two way programme exchange between different parts of the region. This provides a means for the state broadcaster to promote a sense of national identity through authentic regional voices reflecting the diversity of the country.

The boost to audiences that television has given to mainstream Bollywood movies has added to their value as a commercial asset, even if the film industry has not profited in proportion.. The proliferation of channels should have increased the space available for a wider variety of independent film and documentary makers. Doordarshan sought to enhance this element of their public service role when they gave a dedicated slot on Sunday mornings to the Independent Film Producers' Association to show documentaries that they thought were worthwhile.; but the scheme ran into problems. Doordarshan is still the only consistent outlet for such films, though senior officials of DD acknowledge that it is not enough.

We asked a number of documentary film makers for their view of this. One argues that Doordarshan has been affected not so much by commercial priorities as by an obsession with politics. From his perspective, Doordarshan's limited resources have been largely diverted to news and current affairs. Television is now being looked at as primarily a news medium - despite evidence that the number of slots devoted to news current affairs has been reduced. in competition with entertainment. Another film maker thinks there is no reason why initiatives to promote quality should not work. 'Aspects of quality programming that do not otherwise find expression on TV could be encouraged. We have to strive to keep that public space open. If we do not keep arguing for it, we stop imagining that there can be any structure outside the existing commercially dominated framework.' A third identifies the problems as an attitude on the part of corporate sponsors and advertisers. There is a 'narrow vision of what constitutes concern for the public good by corporate houses'. They would be prepared to support an AIDS-awareness campaign. But he says 'no one has been able to convince them that the business of "Good Ideas" is going to benefit corporate India, and there is no direct financial advantage from a vibrant programming policy.

Former AIR Deputy DG M.P.Lele has also pinpointed the advertisers' responsibility in telling them '...As professional and responsible communicators you should use your creativity to make the consumer empowered, by blending positive social messages along with the commercial messages. Let it not be a scenario of rising expectations and falling hopes.'

SS Gill former CEO of Prasar Bharati has a low opinion of the advertisers ('the most immoral profession') and is allergic to the expression 'market forces'. He argues that at the most private channels can be required to devote one hour to public service broadcasting. But the

possibility of a common interest in social marketing was demonstrated in the 1980s with 'Hum Log'. This was the Latin American style soap opera on Doordarshan, dedicated to a family planning message, which increased its sponsor's sales by eight times, introduced their product - noodles - into the Indian home, and went a long way to putting the practice of commercial sponsorship for TV programmes on the map.

A productive link between marketing products for profit and successful social marketing may not be easy to achieve. But it is an approach which recognises that there can be a common interest between the private and public sectors of broadcasting, without pretending that one should replace the other. The social market approach characterised the 1986 Peacock Committee on financing broadcasting in Britain, and a social market logic underpinned the 1990 Broadcasting Act in the UK. Even if the ultimate aim was to be the abolition of controls as the free marketers argued, it would be necessary to act ensure that deregulation did not carry with it lower standards and restricted choice. The BBC itself was relatively insulated from the more extreme free market prescriptions. The principal obligation arising from that Act for the BBC as the British public broadcaster was a requirement to commission a percentage of programmes from independent production companies. South Asian public broadcasters had already embraced similar measures and without specific regulation have gone much further in adopting commercial solutions. In Britain the commercial companies in turn were promised a 'lighter touch' in the regulation of their own public obligations. The requirement to provide a 'sufficient amount of quality programmes' was not defined.

In south Asia governments have been drafting the conditions for the granting of licenses. In the Indian draft Broadcasting Bill of 1997 the conditions for a license included taste and decency provisions. It also required impartiality and accuracy both in news and in discussing social political or public policy issues. There were no specific programme quality criteria. In Sri Lanka an applicant for a television license has to demonstrate technical, financial and professional qualifications. There is some attempt to check the financial viability of a proposal and the kind of programmes that are planned, though precisely what criteria are applied is not clear. Applications have to be passed through the minister, the state television corporation and the Telecom department. The Bangladesh guidelines initially ruled out news but that was changed. They require programmes to meet professional and technical standards; they also make specific requirements for the manner in which national holidays are marked.

There is no established or independent mechanism for monitoring or reporting on programme quality.

The important principle for the public service broadcaster is that the free market does not in practice produce the variety and choice of programmes that even its advocates expect. Intervention may be required to provide what the free market fails to provide. A committee set up in Sri Lanka to advise on the reform of laws affecting media freedom in 1996 warned that while media diversity was important, 'granting licenses to private broadcasters should not be viewed as a substitute for ensuring the pluralism and independence of public-funded broadcasting'. This is a clear rejection of the neo liberal view as expressed by the British journalist and free market advocate Samuel Brittan that '...all provision for the consumer on a competitive basis in a non distorted market is a public service'. But it does not mean that there is a fundamental conflict between the free market and public service objectives and ideals.

For south Asian broadcasters which have already taken big steps in the direction of commercialisation this is surely a valuable approach. A stronger regional focus for the national broadcaster would help to strengthen its credibility and exploit its assets as an institution operating in every part of the country. And there are advertisers who can use their communication skills to promote broader social objectives among those who are not necessarily big consumers. To sustain public service broadcasting it is important to identify this common ground and to build on it.

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**DAY TWO**

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