

**Deutsche Welle - AMIC
Seminar on**

RADIO PROGRAMMING IN A MULTIMEDIA AGE

COUNTRY PAPER – SRI LANKA

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COUNTRY PAPER – SRI LANKA

Radio Sri Lanka - Asia's Pioneer Broadcaster

Sri Lanka was the first British colony to enter the field of Public Service Broadcasting. It was also the first in Asia. The foundation was laid by Radio Amateurs in Sri Lanka who built a 250 watt transmitter using parts taken off the radio equipment of a German submarine captured during World War One when it ended in 1918.

The then Governor of colonial Ceylon, Sir William Henry Manning, inaugurated broadcasting on June 27 1924 with a broadcast of an address to the Annual Sessions of the Engineering Association of Ceylon. Broadcasts were made two or three times a week, depending on the availability of programme material from July 1 1924. The new service was a single transmission carrying both western and oriental programming. Regular programmes included studio concerts, news items, church services and other relays from outside sources and talks interspersed with recorded music. By the end of the year, a total of 456 programmes were broadcast in 415 hours of transmission. With a seventy-year history behind it, Radio Sri Lanka is today a forward-looking station with services that rank with some of the bigger stations in the world.

The original Broadcasting office was located at the Central Telegraph building in the Colombo Fort. The entire complex initially consisted of two rooms one of which was the studio with a microphone and piano. Records were played off a gramophone. All the announcers were volunteers who did not receive any remuneration. At first there was no commercial content whatsoever and the only revenue came from large companies which bought records for the station. They were given credit at the end of the song each time it was played.

The Broadcasting Office was shifted to a location at Torrington Square in 1927 where it has remained, except for a brief interlude during World War Two.

Broadcasting in Sri Lanka took a new direction when the Commercial Service was founded in 1950. Clifford Dodd a veteran Australian broadcaster was seconded to the Radio Ceylon as it was known then, to introduce Sri Lankans to the disciplines of Commercial Broadcasting. In spite of the huge revenues generated by the Commercial Arm, which brought professionalism to broadcasting in Sri Lanka, Radio Ceylon did not forget its role as a public service broadcaster, which it fulfils to this day.

Today, Radio Sri Lanka broadcasts in Sinhala Tamil and English on 53 frequencies with the Sinhala Commercial Service beaming programmes on a 24-hour basis. There are separate channels with programmes on sports, special Tamil programmes for listeners in the North-East of the country, and a Tamil transmission very popular with listeners in South India. Additionally, Radio Sri Lanka's All Asia Services and South East Asia Service reach a very wide audience on the Short Wave frequencies. Seventeen transmitting stations located islandwide cover the entire country on FM Stereo, FM, MW & SW transmissions with nearly 1,500 hours of programming per week over twenty different services.

The call sign of the State Radio in Sri Lanka has undergone numerous changes over the years. Radio Ceylon the original name of the Broadcasting Department, was changed to the Ceylon Broadcasting Corporation and later to the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation which it is officially called even today. But the station ID is now a less

verbose Radio Sri Lanka – connoting the professionalism and modernity required to take on the private sector competition.

The Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation is the state broadcasting institution in Sri Lanka. It has the country's most comprehensive studio facilities both in Colombo and the regional stations. Facilities are available in Colombo for Studio recordings, programme and voice relays and the production of audio cassettes and Compact Discs. Transmissions from the main studios in Colombo are fed to the repeater stations via microwave links.

The programming caters to a diverse listenership with coverage of sports and other events, news, politics, education, religious activities, gender and health issues, trade, commerce and music. While the Sinhala Commercial Service carries a 24-hour transmission, other services begin transmissions at dawn and many continue till late at night. The coverage of domestic services is over 90% of the population of Sri Lanka. The listenership is over 50%.

The Foreign Services of Radio Sri Lanka have a large audience, the largest being in India. They also provide the major share of revenue. When the last major audience survey was conducted in 1990, there were 14 Million listeners to the All Asia Hindi Service. There were also 6.3 Million listeners to the All Asia Tamil Service and 1.2 Million listeners to the All Asia English Service. Even the broadcasts in Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam were listened to by 1.3 Million people in the Indian State of Andhra Pradesh, One Million in Karnataka, 1.1 Million in Kerala and 330,000 people in Tamilnadu. More than 25 Million listeners outside Sri Lanka. In comparison, Sri Lanka's current population is 18 Million.

Among Radio Sri Lanka's greatest resources are its broadcasting personnel. With such a long history behind it the station has become something of an academy of broadcasting. Generations of radio artistes – presenters, newscasters, journalists, singers, musicians, lyricists, dramatists and technical staff have been trained at Radio Sri Lanka. The best international standards have been matched in English and Tamil, while new ground has been broken in Sinhala Radio. As employees of state radio, the staff have also benefited from interacting with broadcasters from around the world at international fora and training programmes.

Another perhaps inevitable consequence of longevity for a radio station is an excellent archival library. Radio Sri Lanka's archives are among the best. The material includes coverage of every major international event from the declaration of war in 1939 to the moon landing. Dozens of foreign Presidents, Prime Ministers, Ministers, Nobility and other dignitaries have spoken on Radio Sri Lanka over the years.

Radio Sri Lanka also has the distinction of having one of the best collections of English Records outside the United States and Britain. The thousands of titles in the library include rare original recordings that are not found anywhere else in Asia.

1. GEARING-UP FOR THE FUTURE

The SLBC is fast gearing-up to face the challenges of the new millenium. Broadcasting is no more a state monopoly. In order to effectively compete with the private sector, the government has decided to down-size the SLBC to make it leaner and more efficient. A state-funded **voluntary retirement package** offers employees attractive compensation.

2. **PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING**

The Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation is the pioneer Public Service Broadcaster in South Asia. The National Services in the three languages have reorganised their programmes to include more public service programming.

3. **NATIONAL INTEGRATION**

The SLBC is promoting the peace culture and multi-ethnicity by carrying interactive radio programmes which allow participation of listeners from all over the island via the telephone without any bias or discrimination. Radio is expected to play a key role in the process of national integration.

4. **MW PROJECT TO REACH THE TAMIL SPEAKING POPULATION IN THE NORTHERN AND EASTERN PROVINCES**

The Irattaperiyakulam medium wave station was established last year to mainly serve the Tamil speaking population in the Northern and Eastern parts of the country. The Tamil service radiated by this station reaches a target audience in areas where there is a strong LTTE presence. It reaches a vast area that would be very costly to cover on FM. The cost of this project including the 50W transmitter was only Rs. 50 Million.

5. **BALANCED REPORTING OF NEWS**

In the past few months, major changes have been made in the policy regarding the SLBC's news broadcasts. It is being transformed from *"the voice of the government"* to the *"the voice of the people"*. This change has already won great acceptance from all quarters.

6. FM EXPANSION PROJECT

In 1994 the government decided to extend the coverage of FM Broadcasts of the SLBC by expanding the technical capabilities. The project is estimated to cost around Rs. 400 Million and is funded by the government.

As a result, we have been able to provide improved coverage to the North Western, North Eastern and North Central regions of the island on all six services of the SLBC which originate from Colombo, along with the Rajarata Sevaya which originates from the SLBC Studios in the North Central Province.

With the completion of the project this year, Radio Sri Lanka will provide improved coverage in the Western and Southern Provinces.

REGULATORY AUTHORITY FOR BROADCASTING

We have made the following initial submissions to Parliament for the establishment of a Regulatory Authority for Broadcasting in Sri Lanka. Presently, the regulatory powers are with the Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications and The Media, with some of the functions though dormant, vested in the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation.

The reason for state involvement in broadcasting is because broadcasting uses a limited natural resource i.e. the frequency spectrum.

The allocation of frequencies and the control of the frequency spectrum are not mentioned in the SLBC Act. This is obviously because broadcasting was a state

monopoly when the Act was formulated. Today private stations have been licensed without sufficient control particularly over their transmitting power limits.

In most countries, private Radio Stations are not countrywide. They are confined to specific geographic areas. In Sri Lanka, the situation is different; while the SLBC was allowed only 1kW of power to run its FM transmitters, some private operators were allowed 5 kW. The State Broadcaster was therefore faced with unfair competition both for audience share and in airtime sales.

The pivotal role of the SLBC as the public service broadcaster and as the supervisory and controlling agency for broadcasting in Sri Lanka by powers and functions conferred by the Act appear to have been ignored over the years.

All Radio Stations, private or State owned should follow ***broadcasting Ethics.*** Today there is no supervision of the programmes broadcast by the private radio stations. This despite there being a specific provision in the Act for the ***"control and supervision by the SLBC, of programmes broadcast from private broadcasting stations"***. Proper regulation is necessary to prevent a decadence of our culture and to ensure peace and social stability through ethnic integration.

Anyone who takes control of a ***Radio Station with an island-wide reach*** could cause mayhem in the country. Private Radio Stations too are at risk.

The current need is an ***Independent Regulatory Authority for the Electronic Media.***

This body should set guidelines, rules and regulations, ensure compliance, and deal with non compliance. The Authority would ensure national interest and consider carefully the future demands on the frequency spectrum.

The job of a regulatory body should be to protect public interest in broadcasting and the independence of broadcasting. *However, it should not become involved in programme content or play the role of a censor.*

The following are some of the important areas that may be considered before establishing the broadcasting regulatory authority.

1. The purpose of this Authority should be to ensure the provision of free and editorially independent Broadcasting both in the public and in the private sector and to guarantee freedom of information.
2. Broadcast services should serve public needs in information, culture, education, and entertainment and reflect diversity of opinion. Programme content should respect the diversity of cultures. The basic right to communicate in conditions of pluralism and the equality of opportunity among democratic groups and political parties must be respected.
3. Broadcasters should be guaranteed independence from the state. They should be licensed and regulated by, an answerable to an independent authority for radio, television and cable.

4. The regulatory authority shall be the sole broadcast-licensing agency. It shall license all private broadcast services, and will set the terms and conditions of such licenses. It will have the power to penalize the broadcaster and in extreme cases to revoke a license (but such a measure should be subjected to contest at a court of law).
5. The Licensee shall comply with the relevant international agreements and the national laws on matters particularly with regard to copyright, obscenity, privacy and human rights.
6. The Authority shall regulate the level of independent production carried out by each Licensee so as to encourage diversity of sources of production and the authority should seek to actively promote domestic programming.
7. The authority shall arrange a degree of access time for the public and balanced access for political parties.
8. The Authority may set *limits to advertising revenues* in order to ensure the appropriate balance between the public sector and the private sector.
9. The Authority should not issue broadcast licenses to political parties, advertising agencies, and entities controlled by non-citizens.

10. The Authority shall establish a complaints committee to deal with individuals who believe they have been unfairly treated in a broadcast and who are not satisfied by the response of the licensee.

11. The Authority shall assign to a licensee the appropriate frequency or frequencies reserved for broadcasting according to the frequency management agency (FMA). This agency shall be charged with the fair allocation of the spectrum given under international agreement. The Regulatory Authority shall be given full access to the

Broadcasting in Sri Lanka is gearing-up to face new challenges. Both Radio and TV are wooing an audience that is becoming more quality conscious everyday. I am confident that we in Sri Lanka would make judicious use of the new technologies with a greater emphasis on listener-based programming.

Presented by Eric Fernando, Director General, Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation.