

**The Impact Of Transnational Television Broadcasting
Upon The People Of The Asian-Pacific Region**

By

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A Paper Presented at
Seminar on Television Development
in the Asian-Pacific Region

Sponsored by
Department of Information
Government of Indonesia

Jakarta, December 8-9, 1994.

Because of the rapidly available communication satellites and reduction in reception cost in recent years, transnational television is becoming a common phenomenon in many countries in the Asian-Pacific region. Television programs originating in Hong Kong, featuring news, songs and dances in the fashion of MTV, and entertainment programs accenting Western lifestyle and values, are now reaching a vast and ever growing audience in Southeast Asian countries and beyond. Even a country as tightly controlled as China has found it difficult to keep such satellite television programs off the air. China's first MTV has recently been allowed to appear on television in Shanghai, eighteen hours a day.

The impact is likely to be far reaching because it involves a clash of fundamental cultural values driven by the almost unstoppable forces of modern communication technologies. This is a question with enormous policy implications because the consequences can threaten the cultural integrity of a country. Indeed the situation confronting us is serious. Yet other than a six-year longitudinal research jointly conducted by the Government of Indonesia in cooperation with the East-West Center from 1976 to 1982 (Chu, Alfian, and Schramm, 1991) and a more recent survey of communication and changing cultural values conducted in Eastern China by the East-West Center in late 1987 (Chu and Ju, 1993), we have only limited objective research evidence (e.g., Budhisantoso, 1981; Soemardjan and Breazeale, 1993) that can shed light on the nature of the problem to guide policy formulation.

My paper will review the research findings from Indonesia and China and discuss journalistic reports and anecdotal evidence from other countries. I will then return to address some of the policy issues facing countries that are becoming reluctant targets of transnational television broadcasting. I will end my paper with a few suggestions on what the recipient countries can do to minimize the adverse impact of such broadcasts.

Potential audience of transnational television broadcasts:

Who are the likely audience of transnational television broadcasting? The data from the study of Palapa satellite television in Indonesia cannot answer this question because at the time when our research began in 1976, the Indonesian national television had relatively few foreign programs. When the China survey was conducted in late 1987, foreign programs were already quite popular on Chinese television. This gave us an opportunity to identify the audience profile of foreign programs, which are mostly American in origin. We measured exposure to foreign programs in this manner. Using a five-point scale consisting of "a lot," "some," "not much," "very little," and "not at all," we found 26.6% of the sample (n = 2,000) watched "a lot" of Western films on television, and 6.5% watched "a lot" of Western song and dance television programs. Some 12% said they listened to "a lot" of Western music on radio, and as many as 38.2% said they preferred Hollywood films to Chinese movies. The high percentage of the Chinese audience who preferred Hollywood movies came as a surprise, considering the fact that Hollywood films were a relatively recent phenomenon in China after the open door policy of 1978. We combined the four items into a single index of exposure to Western cultural influence. Using this index, we found Western cultural influence to have a relatively high multiple correlation of .48 ($p < .001$) with age, education, urban residence, and gender. Those more heavily exposed to Western cultural influence tended to be much younger, much better educated, and residing in metropolitan Shanghai. Men seemed to be slightly more inclined toward Western influence than women.

Based on research conducted in China, we can say with considerable confidence that the primary audience of transnational television broadcasts elsewhere will also likely be young, better educated, and living in urban areas. They also happen to be the most impressionable age group, and highly vulnerable to the external cultural influence coming from the transnational broadcasts. From the China data, it is interesting to note

that economic status was not a relevant factor. If the same trend holds in other countries, it means that those of lower economic status would be exposed to Western cultural influence, including the affluent lifestyle portrayed in Hollywood films and American television programs, just as much as those of higher economic status. Since they can least afford the luxuries they see in those programs, this kind of exposure can have negative implications to societal stability because it raises material aspirations that cannot possibly be fulfilled by the majority of low income people in any country.

Acquisition of knowledge and information:

Will transnational television broadcasts contribute to knowledge about the world outside? The answers are both yes and no. Indonesia's own satellite television was found to help the viewers acquire a wide range of useful knowledge and information, about national events, about family planning practices, and about development programs. In fact, the impact was so profound that television became the most important source of news information for rural villagers. As many as 64% of viewers named television as their primary source of news information, surpassing all the other channels combined. In-depth observations conducted in 1989 in several Indonesian villages confirmed the earlier survey results. Soemardjan and Breazeale (1993) found the people in one village (Lubuk Sukon) to be "unanimous in their opinion that radio, television and newspapers are very useful in broadening their minds and enabling them to know about people and events beyond the boundaries of their village community" (p. 33). These findings suggest that if native television offers news and information which is relevant and readily comprehensible to viewers, then it will definitely contribute to acquisition of knowledge. However, most news broadcasts from transnational satellite transmission are in either English or Chinese. Only the better educated elite will understand English, and only the ethnic Chinese will understand Mandarin or Cantonese. They can be expected to acquire useful information from such news broadcasts. The majority of viewers will probably

not benefit from the news programs on transnational broadcasts, except through a secondary channel of interpersonal communication as follows: transnational broadcasts -- to viewers who understand English or Chinese -- to their friends and acquaintances. The impact of this kind of secondary communication will most likely be rather limited.

Impact on indigenous religion:

Will such transnational broadcasts have an adverse impact on indigenous religious practices and beliefs? On the basis of our research in Indonesia (Chu, Afian, and Schramm, 1991), the answer, unfortunately, is most likely yes. We found that among Muslim television viewers, those who participated in community evening prayers, known as *mengaji*, dropped sharply. We asked the respondents, both before and after television was made available to them, how they spent their spare time in the evenings. Among the Muslim majority, 13% before television mentioned *mengaji*, that is, going to the village mosque or gathering in small groups for the traditional Koran recitation, and another 4.7% said they attended religious talks in the villages. Among non-viewers six years later, those who mentioned *mengaji* rose slightly to 16.2%, while those who attended religious talks decreased a little to 2.7%. The changes were marginal. Among the Muslim television viewers, the picture was quite different. Those who participated in *mengaji* in the evening dropped nearly by half, to 6.1%, and virtually nobody (0.6%) said they attended religious talks. It is quite clear that just the amount of time spent in front of television has had an impact on evening prayers and other traditional religious practices. In the long run, such effects may weaken indigenous religious beliefs. This can have rather serious implications for Islam, as these traditional religious activities were particularly meaningful to the Muslims. These activities were not mentioned at all by the Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Confucians either before or after television.

The survey research findings are corroborated by in-depth observations in a selected number of Indonesian villages. In a study of the impact of village development

programs, including the introduction of television, Soemardjan and Breazeale (1993) had this to say:

"...some of the orthodox religious teachers think that the mass media have caused erosions in the religious devotion of the community and have had particularly adverse effects on the young generation. In their opinion, TV keeps people at home instead of going to the prayer house, where they should be performing their evening prayers....Instead of listening to religious songs, young people now prefer vulgar pop music. People of the older generation comment that traditional and religious morals are disintegrating ...(p. 33)"

There is, however, a somewhat positive side. Among the Muslims, those who attended to religious programs in mass media, including both television and radio, increased significantly among television viewers. We presented the results in Table 1. (For detailed research findings on the impact of television on religious practices in rural Indonesia, see Chu, Alfian, and Schramm, 1991, pp. 215-223):

Table 1

Attending to Religious Programs in Mass Media Among Muslims*

	1976 Pre-TV	1982 Viewers	1982 Non-viewers
Most of the time	9.6%	44.7%	23.0%
Quite often	41.2%	45.3%	48.6%
Once in a while	25.4%	8.4%	17.8%
Never	23.8%	1.6%	10.7%

*This table is based on Table 7.15 in Chu, Alfian and Schramm, 1991, p. 218.

We see that at the time of the 1976 pre-TV survey, exposure to religious programs in the media, mostly radio, was rather low. Among non-viewers six years later there was an appreciable rise, most likely as a result of the increasingly popular use of

transistor radio. Among TV viewers in 1982, those who attended to religious programs in the media increased sharply. Those who said "most of the time" rose from 9.6% in 1976 to 44.7% among TV viewers in 1982, while those who said "never" dropped from 23.8% to 1.6%. Our research findings show that television can be potentially useful for supplementing regular religious activities. We also found that the percentages of respondents who attended mosque Friday remained stable whether they were television viewers or non-viewers. It may be noted that during the six-year period of our research, there was no television programming at noon time Friday. Thus television could not be an interference to mosque attendance. Transnational television broadcasts from the satellite will be different. There will be television programs everyday, including mosque time Friday. It remains to be seen whether mosque attendance will decline, in a way similar to the drop of *mengaji* prayers, as a result of competition from television. If regular mosque attendance should suffer, the impact could be more devastating than the declining participation in *mengaji*.

Impact on consumer behavior:

Will transnational broadcasts have an impact on consumer behavior, in terms of spending hard-earned cash by viewers on advertised foreign products? Transnational satellite television programs are filled with such advertising. Again on the basis of our research in Indonesia, the answer is definitely yes. Between 1976 and 1982, as Indonesia's economy steadily improved and the rural villagers had more money to spend, purchase of a wide range of consumer products increased even among non-viewers. For every item, however, the increased level of purchase among television viewers far surpassed that among non-viewers (Chu, Alfian, Schramm, 1991). We cite a few examples here to illustrate. Perfume: 30.8% before TV, 36.1% among non-viewers in 1982, 56.5% among TV viewers in 1982. Soft drinks: 13.1% before TV, 27.3% among non viewers, 58.3% among TV viewers. Hair cream: 60.2% before TV, 63.2% among

non-viewers, 79.1% among viewers. The trend was clear and undeniable. Television viewers bought these items far more than non-viewers. In fact, the Government of Indonesia was so concerned that it took the drastic step in 1982 of abolishing all commercials on its national television broadcasts. This ban still stands for the national broadcasts today although commercial channels in Indonesia are now allowed to carry advertising. There is no question that television advertising has an impact on the purchase of advertised items. But transnational television broadcasts are different from Indonesia's own national television. There is little any governments can do to bar television commercials on the transnational broadcasts. And these TV commercials are far more attractively produced and appealing than the primitive advertising on Indonesian television in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Is it possible that viewers of transnational television broadcasts will over-spend beyond their means, thus cutting into their savings or even piling up debts? Or perhaps will they prefer to buy the advertised foreign goods instead of native products? Either way there can be an adverse impact on the local economy. This question deserves careful research attention.

Effect on cultural values:

What might be the consequences of the clash of cultural values? Will transnational television broadcasts have an adverse impact on work ethic, on the indigenous tendency to defer gratifications, on traditional values related to male-female relations, and on dedication to societal goals? We have no data from the Indonesian Palapa satellite television research. Based on research findings from China, the answers will most likely be "yes" for all these questions. Chinese who were heavily exposed to Western entertainment programs on television and other media were very different compared with those little exposed. The former were not serious in their work habits. They were impatient about enjoying life, not strictly bound by traditional moral standards in heterosexual relations, and less concerned about contributions to society. These

differences suggest a tendency of being influenced by the superficial quest of hedonism that is sometimes portrayed in American television. While the direction of causality remains unresolved with correlational analysis of this nature, common sense suggests some degree of Western cultural influence. Most likely there is a two way traffic. That is, those who were young, better educated, and urban were initially attracted by the American programs on Chinese television. Having been exposed to the kind of affluent lifestyle, they develop certain cultural values that depart from the traditional diligence and frugality that we find in many developing countries.

Observations made in 1989 in several Indonesian villages point to similar concerns among the village elders (Soemardjan and Breazeale, 1993). The older generation complained about "the shamelessly close physical distance permitted between males and females when appearing in public." In the eyes of the elders, "young people no longer adhere to local customs and religious values, either in their public actions or in their personal relations with older people. The older people say that youths nowadays are caught up in moral decadence (p. 36)." They particularly blamed television. Anecdotal evidence elsewhere paints a disturbing picture as well. A recent journalistic report from urban Malaysia (Cheng, 1994) portrayed the wayward life of teenage girls who were indulging in indiscriminate premarital relations for fun and money. Popularly known as the "silent" cohorts, these teenage girls, some as young as twelve or thirteen, went out at night after their parents had gone to bed. They went around town looking for a one-night adventure, sometimes for money and sometimes just for fun. They did not even know the names of the boys they spent the night with. Some even went across the border to Singapore in search of adventure. They returned home before dawn so that their parents had no idea of what they were doing. Some Malaysian commentators blamed the Western cultural influence, especially television, for this serious erosion of traditional values.

In another news report from northern Thai villages (McNulty, 1994), some rural parents were said to have no scruples about selling their teenage daughters into prostitution for quick monetary gains in order to fulfill their own material desires. This was said to be a rampant trend noticeable only in the last couple of years. "Just a few years ago," the report said, "in close-knit traditional villages like Seanjai Pattana, parents would have been ashamed that their daughters were off in the big cities sleeping with strangers to support their families." Now times have changed. According to Chakrapand Wongburanawart, dean of the faculty of social sciences at Chiang Mai University, "the once isolated villagers are increasingly sacrificing their daughters to pay for the luxuries of the modern world." These journalistic reports did not specifically identify the cause of such behavioral patterns among some Malaysian teenagers and village parents in northern Thailand. Nor do we know how prevalent these trends were, if indeed these reports were not isolated cases. As a plausible hypothesis, we think a common element could be the temptation from television programs, including those originating from the West. We need objective research to verify this hypothesis. If indeed television plays a role in the erosion of important and fundamental family values, such as chastity and protection of unmarried daughters, then the situation would deserve serious policy consideration.

Positive Impact?

The government-directed satellite television in Indonesia was found to have a number of beneficial effects on village viewers, such as improving their ability to understand the national language Bahasa Indonesia, greater participation in village community organizations, more confidence in dealing with the market in town, and increased knowledge and usage of birth control practices (Chu, Alfian, and Schramm, 1991). Can we expect such positive effects from the transnational television broadcasts? Strictly speaking, only objective research can answer this question. But on the basis of what we know about the program contents of transnational television broadcasts, I am

afraid none of these positive effects will be likely. These television programs are not broadcast in the national languages, and therefore will not help viewers of lower education to learn their lingua francas. There is generally little in these transnational television broadcasts that is directly relevant and meaningful to the day-to-day life in the local communities. Therefore, the viewers are unlikely to learn much that will be useful to them, at least not on a short term basis. For example, it is highly doubtful whether anything on these television programs will encourage the viewers to actively participate in their local community affairs, or adopt agricultural innovations or family planning practices.

What can be done?

Although we lack up-to-date research findings, the picture we gain from both earlier research and anecdotal evidence is not reassuring. The potentially negative impact of transnational television broadcasts, on erosion of cultural values, on interference with indigenous religious practices, and on excessive purchase of the advertised goods, seems to far outweigh any possible benefits. The situation is indeed serious, because the technologies are so powerful that little can be done to stop the invasion from the air.

But not everything is lost. Becoming aware of the problem, I believe, is the first step toward finding a solution. Now that we have some ideas of what the impact could be, we can actively consider feasible policy options to minimize the negative impact. By and large, several steps can be considered.

One, countries that are being invaded from the air can get together and act in unison to put pressure on the transnational television broadcasts to clean up their act, so to speak. This is easier said than done. But something must be done at the source of the problem. Before we can approach the operators of transnational television broadcasts, we need factual data to back up our arguments. First, we need to document the contents

of these programs. This can be done through a content analysis, similar to what Alfian and Chu did for the Indonesian satellite television (Alfian and Chu, 1981). This kind of research will show concretely what messages and values are being sent over the transnational television broadcasts. Second, if at all possible, we need empirical research to assess the impact of such broadcasts on the indigenous viewers. With these concrete research findings, the recipient countries will be in a strong position to present their case. What can be actually accomplished is a matter of negotiation, with threatened retaliation if necessary.

Two, the indigenous television stations must improve their own programs to make them more attractive, especially for the young audience. This step is important because it can make the transnational television sound less attractive than before, relatively speaking. One example is Taiwan. People in Taiwan can watch television programs from China and Hong Kong, but relatively few bother to do so. They find Taiwan's indigenous programs more appealing. I think both language and culture play a part in the audience preference in Taiwan. Television programs from Hong Kong are produced in Cantonese, which the Chinese people in Taiwan find difficult to understand. Television programs from China are produced in the same Mandarin Chinese as is spoken in Taiwan. But television viewers in Taiwan are generally turned off by the heavy dose of indoctrination that is usually found in television programs from China. Taiwan's experience suggests that other things being equal, viewers will most likely prefer their own national programs.

Three, there must be public education programs directed at specific social issues, such as teenage sex, child prostitution, teenage violence, etc., for which transnational television assumes at most only a partial responsibility. We must not unfairly blame everything on transnational television.

Four, we need up-to-date systematic research to continuously monitor the situation, including content analysis of the television programs and analysis of social and

cultural impact. Although research findings from one country, such as Indonesia, would be useful to other countries as well, ideally each country would need to develop its own research agenda within its own social and cultural contexts. Only with original research can we come up with relevant and data-based policy guidelines.

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