

MEDIA PLURALISM AND EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE: A CASE STUDY APPROACH TO PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING IN ASIA

KALINGA SENEVIRATNE & SUNDEEP R. MUPPIDI

The media play a central role in promoting freedom of thought and expression in every society. They offer opportunities for citizens to access information on relevant political, economic and cultural information. This information in turn becomes critical for the growth, development and prosperity of a nation as an informed citizenry is more apt to contribute to national development. Public service media constitute one of the key agents for providing citizens with information, education and entertainment that is free of commercial, State or political influences and biases.

Asia has witnessed a profound transformation of its media landscape since the mid-1980s when deregulation of State television monopolies resulted in a dramatic growth in commercial television outlets. Cable and satellite television have since proliferated at a phenomenal rate providing Asians with a wide range of television channels. In this commercial environment, it is imperative to find ways in which the media can remain accountable and transparent and continue to promote and protect the public interest. This is why, more than ever before,

public service television should be strengthened so as to ensure that freedom of thought and expression, pluralism and accountability are protected.

However, in most Asian countries, public service television has been transformed into State broadcasting where the State has exerted full control and influence on all aspects of the working of the national broadcaster. This has significantly restricted the freedom of national broadcasters in their programming, reporting and operations. In order to ensure that a public service broadcaster does not function as a State broadcaster, it is essential to guarantee the editorial independence of national broadcasters. However, through both overt and covert means, many governments have controlled television for promoting their own political and economic interests. Another recent trend, among most national broadcasters, has been to seek funding through commercial revenue and advertising. This has also diverted these public service and State broadcasters from their original mission and mandate.

Editorial Independence

This 'Media Pluralism and Editorial Independence in Broadcasting in Asia' project aims to assess the extent of editorial independence of public service and State broadcasters by presenting case studies of selected countries in Asia. It proposes to assess the power of political and economic power groups on public service television by examining the regulatory frameworks which guarantee such independence as well as to assess the freedom which they have in terms of their programming choice, reporting, recruitment and budgeting. Editorial independence will be examined under the following categories:

- **Political:** Independence to report and analyze political events and issues without overt government interference

- **Economic:** Independence to report and analyze economic events and policy issues without the overt government and big corporate / business interference, as well as the ability to reflect opposing views on government economic policy from ordinary people, academics and civil society.
- **Cultural:** Ability to report and analyze cultural events and issues without government and religious /cultural hierarchy interference.
- **Geographic:** Ability to report, especially political, economic and development issues where the viewpoints of rural and urban marginalized (lower socio-economic background) people are reflected in reports and programmes, such as current affairs features and documentaries.
- **Minorities:** Ability to report national political, economic, cultural, and development issues incorporating the viewpoints of ethnic / religious minorities and indigenous / tribal people.

Media Pluralism

Political economists speak of pluralistic societies when they refer to secular democratic societies. Pluralism recognizes and encourages the existence and the rights of different views, different perceptions and different expressions to coexist in a peaceful manner. Different political parties, different social organizations, different religions, different castes, different cultural expressions, different traditions, different commercial products, different services, can all coexist and be at equilibrium. Continuing the same logic, different types of media with different ideologies, beliefs and leanings can also coexist and be at equilibrium. Equilibrium is maintained when there is respect for views other

than one's own. Equilibrium is also maintained when reporting of events and facts takes place in an objective manner, giving importance to facts and keeping in mind the public good. All Media need to be sensitized and made aware of this aspect of pluralism as well.

However, pluralism can be achieved in and through the media only if they are provided with the necessary independence to express ideas and opinions freely and to disseminate opinions and criticisms devoid of any censorship or influence. This implies that media pluralism cannot be achieved without full editorial independence. Most Asian public service and State broadcasters have suffered from a chronic lack of editorial independence. According to a World Development Report of the World Bank (2002), on an average, the state controls about 30 percent of the top five newspapers and 60 percent of the top five television stations in 97 countries that have been studied.

Editorial independence has to be guaranteed and promoted through various mechanisms including statutory and regulatory guarantees which prevent governments from intervening in the affairs of a broadcaster, the setting up of independent committees, which govern broadcasting standards. In addition, where public service broadcasters are dependent on advertising revenue, there need to be safeguards that large corporate interests (i.e. Advertisers) do not exert editorial control on the public broadcaster.

Objectives of the Proposed Project:

In light of this rapidly changing television landscape, it is critical to strengthen and enhance the role of public service television. Unfortunately, in most Asian

countries 'true' public service television is non-existent and the existing service can be really referred to as government service television.

The proposed project will specifically address the following problems:

- Define public service broadcasting (PSB) in terms of news and current affairs programming, as well as informational documentary production.
- Assess the level of editorial independence of public/government television
- Analyze and overview the status of pluralism in television in South Asian/South East Asian countries vis-à-vis government regulations, legal requirements, diversity in media, public broadcast
- Examine issues of pluralism and diversity
- Objectivity of reporting news and events
- Examine the extent to which pluralism both in medium and content is practiced effectively, under the categories already listed

Importance of the Proposed Project:

Among the various media, the press has been much discussed and researched, followed by radio. Therefore, it is proposed to take up the subject of television under this project. Television is of recent origin in the countries of the region and is slowly emerging as a popular and powerful medium.

Television is usually faster in giving news and views and has the advantage of being audio-visual and nearly instantaneous. Because of its power to hold the attention of even illiterate viewers, it can easily influence people's views on any issue. Hence, it is important that it remains free, objective, works for the public good and remains plural. Only then can it practice the role of educating the

people on facts and do it in a manner that would effectively contain passions; and at the same time provide knowledge that would help the people attain better living conditions.

The Solution Proposed/Alternative Solutions:

TV as a medium is sought to be controlled by several groups mainly for two reasons:

- i. Its power to create an impact on the viewers and
- ii. Its commercial potential

While the contents of the programme can be controlled by government regulations, such attempts are always fraught with the dangers of curbing freedom of expression. Similarly, while private ownership of the medium by families or companies can ensure freedom of expression, such ownership can still result in partisan coverage of news and views depending upon the political and other leanings of the families or companies that own the medium.

Strong commercial motives can also thwart attempts at ensuring the maximum public good or in achieving and maintaining pluralism. Therefore, the best course seems to be to sensitize the media groups, the government people concerned and others who influence public opinion. This would be an education process; and a process of advocacy. Through such a process of sensitization, the perceptions of the different players as mentioned above are expected to be influenced and changed for better. The changes sought would be in favor of the priorities mentioned earlier.

This project consists of the following:

- a) Research (country-specific) case studies of public service television in the countries of India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand. These reports will present the current status of TV with regard to their freedom, ownership, government regulations, media diversity, ownership structures, impact and pluralism in each of these countries¹.
- b) A CD-ROM presentation for use in media studies courses in Asia and outside. This educational kit contains information on media laws, government regulations, and principles of objective news reporting with specific reference to television within the categories listed earlier. The kit is designed for use both in tertiary institutions as well as for training television / media professionals.
- c) Publication of the findings on the AMIC website at <http://www.amic.org.sg>

¹ In keeping with the spirit of 'Pluralism' that is the theme of this project, deliberate care has been taken by the editors to represent plural styles of writing and presenting. Hence the diversity of presentations reflects the plurality of viewpoints based on the individual writing and presentation styles of each author.