



**Institut für Rundfunkökonomie
an der Universität zu Köln**

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in the Asia-Pacific Region -
What Lies Ahead**

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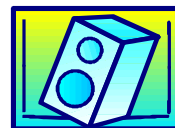
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**Public Service Broadcasting
in the Asia-Pacific Region -
What Lies Ahead***

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen. let me begin this presentation by saying straight away, that, what lies ahead in the context of public service broadcasting in the Asia-Pacific region, is, quite bluntly, a big question mark. And why do I say it's a big question mark. Simply because of the magnitude of the task itself.

For us, it's really huge. For, we are huge ourselves, territorially. The Asia-Pacific region is vast and sprawling, and in fact, we are the largest region in the world, spanning some 17,000 kilometers of land and sea, from Iran in the northwest to the smaller islands of the South Pacific in the southeast. It encompasses both the developed countries like Japan, Australia and New Zealand as well as the developing ones who are at differing levels of economic standing.

Given the diverse political, cultural, religious and socio-economic background of the countries making up the region, it would be impractical, almost impossible, to standardize what role and what functions the public service broadcasters in each country should assume. The deeper we delve into the issue of public service broadcasting in the region the more formidable it becomes. The nearer we get to what we perceived to be the solution the farther away we get thrown back by what we found out to be the hindrances, the limitations. Indeed, there's a lot of hard work to be done.

But we are determined, in intent and in purpose, not to let the whole thing overwhelm us. How long it will remain the big question mark, only time will tell. We will continue to gnaw at it until we reach the light at the end of the tunnel. That, in fact, is the vision -- the healthy growth of public service broadcasting in the Asia-Pacific region in the 21st century. We'll go back to basics, if need be.

Now, having said that, allow me to give you a little bit of a backgrounder. Last year, in December, the AIBD the Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development the inter-governmental body which I now represent organized what was called an International Conference on the Public Service Functions of Broadcasting the Asia-Pacific Perspective. The Conference ran for three consecutive days 1st, 2nd and 3rd of December 1997 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

* This paper was presented by the Acting Director of the "Asia Pacific Institute of Broadcasting Development", at an international conference about "Citizens and the Future of Public Service Broadcasting". The conference was organized by the "World Radio and Television Council" and the "German Organizations for the Promotion of Public Service Broadcasting" on May 18th at Cologne, Germany.



Thanks to the collaborative effort and support of the FES, the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union, UNESCO and Penyar the National Broadcasters Association of Malaysia we were able to get together more than 30 senior broadcasters and government policy-makers from the Asia-Pacific region to participate in the Conference. Speakers from outside the region include Mr. Pierre Juneau, the President of the WRTVC and Mr. Gunter Lehrke of FES in Bonn. And, after three days of intense deliberations, the Conference approved a set of 33 recommendations designed to protect and improve the role of public service broadcasting in the Asia-Pacific region. These recommendations range from the role of government, financing, legislation and regulation to management, programming, technology and international cooperation.

During 3 days of often-frank discussions, delegates acknowledged the profound political, financial and technological changes taking place in the region and the effects these changes were having on the broadcast industry and on our respective societies. Among the greatest challenges are increasing competition from satellite and cable broadcasters and a reduction in funding from many governments.

We recognized that if public service broadcasting was to survive amid the competition and maintain a fair share of the audience; we need to review existing strategies and regulations to be able to meet the diverse needs of the community and the radio-TV audience. There was also a reaffirmation of the role of broadcasters to educate, mobilize and empower all sectors of society, including the under-privileged, through better educational, informational and entertainment programs in the service of national development.

Delegates stressed the need to review existing broadcasting laws and work towards greater political will to ensure greater support for public service broadcasting. New technologies, they said, should be regarded not as a threat but as something that would open up opportunities for the broadcaster to provide better service to the public. Technological advancement will naturally lead to changes in the environment and as changes become more rapid we'll find ourselves back at the starting block, only this time the competition becomes keener and heavier. That again becomes a challenge.

And speaking of challenges, the environment we find ourselves in at this point of time is in itself a challenge we first have to grapple with. You will recall that I mentioned „reaffirmation" and „in the service of national development.“ This needs amplification.

This is a particularly very important point in the context of the Asia-Pacific broadcasting scenario. As indicated earlier, the Asia-Pacific region is by and large still considered „developing“, with the exception of a few countries like, perhaps, Japan and Australia. The others are all at varying degrees of development, even within a given sub-region.



This perhaps needs further clarification. Let's take ASEAN as an example of a sub-region. ASEAN as a grouping, I'm sure, is already well known among member countries of the European Union. It has made great strides in various fields of endeavor, especially economic and political, perhaps to a certain extent even in security and defense. But a closer look will reveal that even within the sub-regional grouping „development“ has never been even. Some, like Singapore and to a certain extent Malaysia, are well on the way up the climb. But several others, especially the newer members of the Association, are still at the lower rungs and at a slower pace of „national development“.

Thus, utilization of the broadcasting media in, quote „the service of national development“ unquote, is hardly surprising. Grappling with national development at least to be at par with others within a given sub-region will continue to dominate overall consideration -- at least at this point of time and in the foreseeable short-term future. Even if we talk about deregulation, it must be regulated. Natural diversity in terms of historical, cultural, political, religious and economic background demands that aims and goals are clearly defined and elaborate guidelines given.

To liberalize the broadcast media in the Asia-Pacific region to the point of laissez-aller or even laissez-faire in the real sense of the word, at this point of their development, would be disastrous. It would invariably lead to class-creation of affordable and knowledgeable haves and haves-not within just a short span of time, which, I am sure, is not what we are all desirous of.

Education is still the key factor -- and time is essential. Money, of course, goes without saying, especially given the economic downturn sweeping throughout Asia now. Question? How best do we meet all these challenges? Among some of the recommendations that deal with the role of government was to encourage national leadership to help develop public service broadcasting by providing more financial support and enacting clear and precise broadcasting laws and licensing conditions. Also, to encourage the State to be more open to other organizational structures such as turning a government-owned broadcasting station into a corporation managed by eminent people from different groups. It was felt that this will better meet competition and community needs, while at the same time reduce official control and interference.

On legislation and regulation, it was recommended that support should be given to any relevant legislation to ensure the necessary political climate for public service broadcasting to prosper; to help develop independent professional regulatory bodies responsible for broadcasting and telecommunications. That a study be conducted on broadcasting laws and regulations in the Asia-Pacific region, the changes that have been made and their impact on the public service functions of broadcasting as a basis for meaningful dialogue with policy makers.



A good example would be India. Sometime in September 1997, on the 10th if I'm not mistaken, you would have noticed that the then Indian Parliament passed a piece of legislation paving the way for the creation of the Prasar Bharati Corporation, an independent body under which All India Radio (AIR) and Doordarshan (DDI) now operate.

The first task of the Prasar Bharati, comprising 10 members, including a full-time CEO and the Directors-General of AIR and DDI, was to highlight the difference from a state controlled media to that of an autonomous one. There were other major changes as well, all of which point towards the right direction. A similar development also took place in Sri Lanka where all the three public service broadcasting organizations -- the SLBC, SLRC, and the ITN -- are now run and administered by their own boards. Their former Directors-General now functions as Chairmen of the respective boards. I am not too sure of whether other major changes have been put into effect, but the point to be made is that there seems to be a trend developing and emerging from the sub-continent. And it's a good trend in so far as public service broadcasting is concerned and we hope it will grow in momentum.

Now, if Malaysia's stance on public service broadcasting is anything to go by, then there is hope, there's room for improvement -- small maybe, but even elbowroom would be quite adequate to begin with. Malaysia's Information Minister, Datuk Seri Mohamed Rahmat was recently reported to have said that the Government would defend public service broadcasting in the country, the purpose being to ensure proper dissemination of information to the public. For that reason, the authorities have rejected an application to privatize TV Two, the second channel of TV Malaysia. In this connection, he added, the role to be played by the Department of Broadcasting would be enhanced and its structure changed to a corporation so as to enable it to compete more effectively against the private broadcasters whose main motive was the financial bottom-line. He went on to say that competition was so keen and increasingly intense these days that the actual and original role of broadcasting has been forsaken. And this was happening not only in Malaysia and the region but also throughout the world.

If only the Minister's idea of „defending public service broadcasting“ could be sown else where as well within the Asia-Pacific region we would certainly have more than just elbowroom to maneuver. It augurs well indeed for the future and synchronized perfectly with what AIBD has in mind. We are now initiating steps in collaboration with the media authorities in Sri Lanka to organize an Asia-Pacific Conference of Ministers Responsible for Media Affairs in Colombo towards the later part of this year. And this issue of „defending public service broadcasting“ may well be one of the agenda items. What a giant step it would turn out to be if we could get all round support, or at least a majority support for such an idea. We'll see -- Inshaallah -- God willing.



All things considered, a big fat „hot potato“ has been thrown onto our laps, especially when it comes to dealing with laws. Comparative studies of rules and regulations and their impact etc. etc. take a lot of time, money and other resources. And, given the diversity that I mentioned earlier, this is quite a hefty one to handle. But, the AIBD is still thought to be the most appropriate regional body being an inter-governmental one to organize a regular dialogue between professional broadcasters and the policy-makers, to look into and discuss the problems and challenges facing public service broadcasting in the Asia-Pacific region.

And then, there are several other recommendations grouped under management, financing and programming -- things like the need to nurture creative and professional talents, improving marketing and commercial management skills and knowledge, tapping media funds of the various government ministries, encouraging more public contributions and/or sponsorship by institutions for specific programs, better management of resources, better utilizing of manpower, suitable programming, conducting extensive audience surveys, diversifying programs to suit the tastes and languages of local communities, including minorities.

These are a much easier task to accomplish since they are really management tools for skill enhancement. All these could be handled within the scope of human resource development through seminars, workshops and training courses already being conducted by the AIBD and other national broadcast training centers. As mentioned earlier as well, new technologies are to be regarded not as a threat but an opportunity to improve efficiency, cost saving, job conversion and multi-skilling, to provide new types of services like interactivity, multi-channel and multi-media services, improving quality of programs and transmission etc.etc. The digital domain is opening up a lot of avenues for revenue generation as well. Already there are over one thousand Internet radios and more that 400 Internet TV in operation now.

Special efforts should also be made to educate policy-makers and political leaders on the value of investment in the introduction of new technologies. The public too needs to be educated for they are the ones who are being challenged; they are the ones who should get involved more and more, if public service broadcasting is to become truly meaningful.

In fact, every opportunity provided by the advent of new technologies should be exploited to ensure universal access to public service broadcasting, and by the same token, the harmonization of regional and global technical standards. These are, of course, very important areas that we are talking about and translated into workload, the AIBD alone may not be able to handle it so efficiently. In any way, these are never meant to be one-man shows.

And that brings me to the next group of recommendations i.e. international co-operation and collaboration. Even some of the earlier recommendations may



not leave the ground in terms of implementation without support and collaboration at the international level. As some of you may already know, sharing the same premises with us, the AIBD, is our so-called sister organization the ABU, the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union. The difference is they are an NGO non-governmental organization whereas we are an IGO, inter-governmental organization.

Despite the difference we are nonetheless more than sister organizations -- dealing with the same subject and with the same purpose -- that of broadcasting development. We have pledged to work hand in hand, and complement and supplement each other in various areas.

In this connection, perhaps a collaborative effort on the part of both AIBD and ABU worthy of mention is Asiavision, a news exchange project which has taken new dimensions now. And as we all know, news and current affairs programs are the single most important element in public service broadcasting. Asiavision, which is also linked to Eurovision, has gone digital. And steps are being taken to develop it further into a news service provider -- and not a news agency, I might add -- which would become yet another highlight in our quest for a conducive environment for the healthy growth of public service broadcasting in the Asia-Pacific region.

The other regional organization with which we have already established some kind of working relationship is the Singapore-based AMIC the Asian Media Information and Communication Center, another NGO. At the moment, we have a once-a-year coordination meeting among the AIBD, ABU and AMIC with, again, FES ready to lend a helping hand. We could perhaps increase the frequency of the coordination meetings in the near future as we embark upon this mammoth task of realizing the vision of a healthy growth of public service broadcasting in the Asia-Pacific region.

We realize that a loose three-cornered arrangement based on mutual understanding and commonality of purpose alone may not be sufficient in itself. The AIBD is now, therefore, making overtures to several sub-regional groupings like ASEAN, SAARC, the ECO, PIBA etc. in order to forge some kind of a Pan Pacific Partnership Network on the policy development front. And, a similar network with national broadcast training centers throughout the region is also being envisaged on the resource development aspect, and this of course includes the very important element of human resource development.

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, These are initial plans and projections into the future which can be further improved, developed and embellished, eventually to be transferred onto paper as blue print. But what is worrisome is the other aspect of it getting it off the ground -- the implementation part of it. That's why I said earlier, and I still say it now -- what lies ahead for public service broadcasting in the Asia-Pacific region remains a big question mark for us.



That's also precisely why I am here today speaking at this Conference -- making contact with you, learning from and exchanging views with you, exploring ways with you, in the hope that we stumble upon something which can be mutually beneficial. We in Malaysia would like to call it „smart partnership“ an arrangement whereby no one loses, no one exploits the other but both sitting together to examine all the options, where both sides stand to gain a win-win situation. As we all know, public service broadcasting is committed to serving the public, programming transmitted in the interests of the public. It is programming designed to provide some sort of service to the public, to help people in their daily lives. On the other hand, commercial broadcasting -- those run by the private sector -- are mainly concerned with making profits. Their programs are designed purely for commercial purposes.

Theirs is the rating game no matter what the score. But the twain can certainly meet and co-exist. There are a lot of things one can learn from the other. Let there be a „smart partnership“ between the two, let's create the win-win situation for the future. Let's bequeath something really beneficial to our inheritors.

Allow me, Mr., Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, to end this presentation with something to ponder -- public service broadcasting is the responsibility of all broadcasters, regardless of whether they are publicly or privately owned. Every broadcasting organization, no matter who owns it, has a responsibility to provide public service broadcasting. Let there be no mistake about that!

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