



“Public Service Broadcasting in a Multi-Platform World”

**26th General Assembly of
Commonwealth Broadcasting Association (CBA)**

**New Delhi, India
15 February 2006**

Keynote presentation

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(COVER SLIDE)

Mr. Chairman,

Distinguished Delegates from the broadcasting fraternity,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset, let me express my gratitude to the organizers of the 26th General Assembly of the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association for giving me the opportunity to participate in this august gathering and to share with you some of my thoughts and concerns on Public Service Broadcasting in the context of a multi-platform environment.

UNESCO and CBA

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Over the years, CBA and UNESCO have forged a symbiotic relationship in their common commitment for promoting a free, fair, and socially responsive broadcast media and in ensuring a new information order in which even the weak and marginalized sections can find a voice. Central to this relationship is the Public Service Broadcasting (PSB).

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In many ways, PSB has been the manifestation of the basic ideals to which UNESCO is wedded: the ideals of freedom of expression, universal access to information, preservation and promotion of cultural diversity, and education for all. These are the very ideals that PSB's three-pronged mission of 'inform, educate and entertain' seeks to implement in their respective countries.

It has been the consistent endeavor of UNESCO to sensitize governments and the public on this unique mission of PSB from time to time. In the early 1990s UNESCO and UNDP, in collaboration with international NGOs, organized a chain of regional media seminars with the express objective of promoting PSB independence. The Windhoek Declaration of 1991 was emphatic in suggesting that "freedom of information and expression and the

independence of press” should be a necessary pre-condition for funding of the public media. This and similar resolutions of later years were endorsed by UNESCO’s General Conference and therefore they reflect the collective will of the international community.

Among the other numerous initiatives of UNESCO, I would just mention a few recent ones:

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- UNESCO-CBA publication on “ Editorial Guidelines” for broadcasters to help them in ensuring objectivity and comprehensiveness in news and current affairs programming (published in 2003)
- UNESCO-CBA publication on Parliamentary Broadcasting which surveyed the recent trends in the field
- UNESCO-CBA handbook on “ Guidelines on Broadcast Regulations” enabling stake-holders both in government and the private sector to establish and maintain an effective and credible broadcast regulation mechanism
- A publication entitled “Citizens Media Dialogue” aimed at helping citizens’ media associations to facilitate citizens’ participation in society through quality electronic media, particularly public service broadcasting. Citizen Media Dialogue is conducted between and amongst citizens about media issues that affect their society, and citizens’ interests. Such a dialogue may take place within citizens’ forums that have a general interest in social issues or a particular interest in sectoral issues, such as education, health, human rights etc.
- UNESCO and World Radio and Television Council (WRTVC) research to develop broadcasting criteria and standards related to rating and certification of broadcasters
- UNESCO and CBA initiatives to produce Interactive Television Chat-shows in the Commonwealth countries on Education for All to take the debate of EFA to the public domain.

At the core of all these initiatives lies the implicit belief in the efficacy of Public Service Broadcasting and its continuing relevance in the fast changing media scenario.

Present Media Scenario

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The past two decades have witnessed sweeping upheavals in all aspects of broadcasting, as well as in the larger social environment. The emergence of the multi channel scenario and proliferation of private broadcasters in the developed as well as developing world has radically altered the face of broadcasting. In the simple world of yester years, when the same news bulletin or programme was watched simultaneously on TV screens across a whole nation, it had its own magic appeal and innate ability to promote social cohesion and national integration in its own way. But the multi-channel and multi-broadcaster situation, while obliterating this unique advantage, brought in its wake, alternative choices to the people. What was hitherto a seller's market has now become a buyer's market. The resultant pluralism and diversity in broadcast offerings are the welcome features of the multi-channel world. At the same time, the advertisement revenues which sustained the private broadcasters inevitably meant commercialization of broadcasting and an unabashed programming style that catered in main to populist taste.

This is of course not to say that public service broadcasters are entirely pure and untouched by commercial elements; nor do I mean that private broadcasters do not possess any public service motif, whatsoever. On the contrary, the fact that a considerable amount of private broadcasting contains elements of public service broadcasting has prompted PSB critics to question the very rationale for their independent existence and their being funded by the public exchequer. As they may argue, PSB in the modern context refers to a particular genre of programmes rather than to particular broadcast organizations: programmes that are socially purposeful, free from vested interests of any kind, culturally enriching, aimed at community welfare, etc. In this sense, public service broadcasting cuts across the public, as well as private broadcasters.

Prima facie, there can be nothing absurd or objectionable in this view point. Nevertheless, what we need to appreciate is that PSB is too vital an aspect of broadcasting to be left entirely to market forces which, at the end of the day, have to perforce thrive on profit making. On the contrary, a broadcast organization with the sole objective of serving the public with wholesome programming without any commercial interests, with particular attention to the needs of the minorities and marginalized sections of society and keeping

itself detached from government influence, is an indispensable need for any nation. The history of public service broadcasting, by and large, vindicates this need.

However, the simultaneous presence of the private broadcasters poses a challenge as well as an opportunity to PSB organizations. In the matter of finances, for example, the methodology of funding PSB organizations through a license fee from the public becomes untenable when it can be argued that the public tend to watch more and more of the private channels rather than the PSB. Direct funding from the State exchequer too comes under pressure for the same reason, though the not-for-profit and public service nature of PSB should be reason enough for direct State funding. To make up for dwindling State support, many PSB operators are banking on advertisement revenue. This is the case mainly in those countries which do not have the practice of levying a license fee from the public.

On the programming front too, PSB organizations have had to re-position themselves in the face of increasing competition from private broadcasters. Diversification of programme content into some private channel kind of programming with a higher dose of entertainment elements, has become commonplace in the PSB organizations' strategy to retain audiences. Understandably, the feeling of some PSB purists is that such compromises necessarily dilute the mandate and mission of the public service broadcasting.

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Even as the public service broadcasting re-defines and re-positions itself in the multi-channel scenario, the ongoing digital revolution has brought in the multi platform environment. The traditional over-the-air broadcasting is now being supplemented and complimented by numerous other distribution platforms: Satellite communications, internet, cable, optic fibre networks, mobile phones, direct-to-home (DTH) television, digital terrestrial TV, satellite radio, etc., to name but a few. Some of these are already well established in the broadcasting arena. The number of these platforms seems to grow as the ICT revolution keeps advancing.

Knowledge Societies:

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The changes we are witnessing in the broadcasting field are but a reflection of the wider societal changes taking place across the globe, largely under the impact of Information and Communication technologies. We are living in the information age, and as the current spread of new technologies continues, the information age transforms itself into knowledge societies. While the information age is built on technological advancements, the concept of knowledge societies embraces a much wider canvass of social, ethical and ideological factors. Since there is a multiplicity of these factors, the concept is essentially pluralistic and therefore the term 'Knowledge Societies' is used rather than one single 'Knowledge Society'.

The unfolding scenario of knowledge societies will be characterized by knowledge, as the major factor governing social and individual progresses. Generation of knowledge, which has all along been the exclusive preserve of a limited few, will now be a mass phenomenon and will occupy the centre stage of the developmental process. Ways and means to preserve the knowledge thus being produced, and the dissemination of knowledge and knowledge-related products & services will be the other major means of livelihood for the inhabitants of these societies. As far as Education is concerned, it becomes the very oxygen, without which no knowledge society can hope to survive.

Role of PSB

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Now, let us revert back to public service broadcasting and surmise the role it may have to play against the backdrop of the emerging knowledge societies. The essentially pluralistic nature of these societies calls for greater diversity in programme offerings that can address the needs and tastes of all segments of the population. Since the base of knowledge production will be very widespread, people at large will be both generators and consumers of knowledge and information. In this context, the mass media should provide for an increasing element of interactivity as an integral part of the broadcasting process. In other words, narrow casting, aimed at specific groups of individuals or even at specific individuals, will grow in importance. The present net-based platforms, with their addressability and interactivity features, are particularly handy in this regard.

As humanity rides the crest of the technological wave at an accelerating pace, a point of deep concern is the growing inequalities among different societies and among different strata within the same society. In the context of the information age and knowledge societies, these inequalities manifest as digital divide, information divide, and knowledge divide. The two phases of the World Summits on the Information Society held in Geneva (December 2003) and Tunis (November 2005) devoted a large part of their deliberations on this growing menace and the need to bridge these divides in the interest of world peace and harmony.

As public service broadcasters and broadcasters in general, this is exactly where you can make a significant contribution to the world at large. Educational programming has enjoyed primacy in the agenda of public service broadcasting in almost all countries and its importance becomes even more pronounced when it comes to bridging the knowledge divide that I have just mentioned. Here in India, a notable development in this direction in the launching of the Gyan Darshan educational channel under a joint initiative of Prasar Bharati and the Indira Gandhi National Open University. There were also parallel initiatives by way of exclusive channels for Engineering & Technology and for Higher education spearheaded by the Indian Institutes of Technology and the University Grants Commission's Consortium for Educational Communications respectively.

Although not technically under the PSB umbrella, the Indian Space Research Organization's Edusat network is yet another milestone in the case of educational broadcasting. The Edusat initiative is also noteworthy in that it uses a variety of platforms: satellite communications in the broadcast mode on Ku Band and two-way data, voice and video interactivity in the DVB-RCS standards. The system also provides for an IP based network for on-line as well as off-line (asynchronous) interactivity. It would be advisable for PSB organizations in other parts of the developing world to study this model for possible replication in their countries.

The multi platform world:

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The multi platform world opens up new vistas of opportunity for public service broadcasters, as well as private broadcasters.

In particular, the internet-based distribution platforms offer unique advantages like distributed and decentralized programming, freedom from geographical limitations, narrow casting to select audiences and significant economies in broadcast operations. However, everything cannot be hunky-dory even on the internet front. Some thinkers fear that “the Internet will weaken the cultural centre and political commons that network TV and metropolitan newspapers provided” (Neuman 1991, Hirsch 1978 as quoted in UNESCO’s publication on ‘Best PSB Practices’). Sometime ago, Elizabeth Smith (Secretary General, CBA), while welcoming the multi platform scenario, gently cautioned the broadcasting organizations against spreading their butter “too thinly” in their anxiety to embrace all possible platforms. I would think that these sobering remarks are meant to suggest that the mere availability of multiple platforms should not be a provocation for their adoption, without a clear understanding of their respective strengths and relevance to the particular aims and objectives of the broadcaster.

In the context of educational broadcasting for example, the interactivity features and multicasting possibilities of the internet based platforms could be considered as an advantage (assuming, of course, that the target groups involved have easy access to the net and computers). These features may not be very important in the case of cultural programmes of an ethnic kind, targeted for the entertainment needs of the local community.

Another point to be kept in mind is that the audience profile for different platforms tends to be different. For example, studies show that youth outnumber other categories of population in using internet and computers for accessing media context. This can be a major consideration in designing broadcast content for different platforms. In other words, programming strategy has to be platform-specific rather than “more of the same” on all platforms.

Conclusion:

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In conclusion, I would say that public service broadcasting as a vibrant medium of the people and for the people is here to stay and can only grow in importance in the increasingly complex times that we live in. The scenario of a multi platform world can be an added advantage to PSB in its noble mission of not only reaching the people and addressing their needs, but also in enabling them to have their say in the democratic polity.

PSB will do well to harness the potential of the multi-platform world in the pursuit of this goal, so that in due course one would also say that public service broadcasting is not only of the people and for the people, but also by the people.

Thank you.

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