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**The Influence Of Television On Cultural Values -
With Special Reference To Third World Countries**

By

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The Influence of Television on Cultural
Values - with special reference to Third
World Countries

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I propose to discuss this subject under three headings.

- A) The impact of the technology of communication per se on cultural values.
- B) The impact of existing (traditional) cultural values on television.
- C) The impact of television programmes on cultural values.

But first a word about the concept of culture. There are a few words that have been used as loosely and with little understanding as the word culture. Different people have used this word differently for different purposes. It is therefore necessary that we define this word clearly at the beginning. For the purposes of this paper, culture will be used in its anthropological sense to refer to all socially transmitted and shared ways of thinking and acting. It will include language, religion, ideas, values, ways of doing and making things and the artifacts themselves. For us therefore, culture means much more than the arts, music and other refinements - its meaning in common usage. Even the most 'primitive' societies have a culture. We do not propose to evaluate culture as 'good' or 'bad'. Nor is culture a static thing. It is living and changing.

A) Technology of communication and culture

The introduction of any new technology, be it an artifact or a new idea to a society will have important implications for the culture and system of social relationships in that society. For

instance, when the Australian natives were given steel axes by the Christian missionaries, their native culture based on the stone axe collapsed. The stone axe was difficult to manufacture, and apart from its utility, was also a basic status symbol of the male superiority in that society. The missionaries not only provided large quantities of sharp and efficient steel axes, but also gave them freely to women and children. The men had sometimes even to borrow these from women, causing a demeaning of their higher social status. A tribal hierarchy based on male superiority gradually collapsed. The uses made of a new introduction depends partly on the ability and readiness of a culture to absorb the new idea or technology. For instance a society that has developed its technology to the level of bullock carts, will need tremendous changes if suddenly 'gifted' with jet planes. Perhaps, in such a society, for a long time, foreign experts will be needed to manage the jet age technology.

Modern technology was developed in the West over a period of over 200 years. As Sociologists such as Max Weber and Robert Merton have pointed out, the technological development of the west was an aspect of a process of social change brought about through the changes of values from a tradition bound feudal system to a modern rational - legal system (Max Weber 1949, Robert Merton 1949) underlying this change to 'rational values' were many factors foremost among which were the weakening of the polity and the influence of religious values, particularly those of Protestantism. (1)

(1) Weber argues that the Protestant religious doctrine of predestination made individuals rationalize every aspect of their lives and strive hard for perfection in the positions they hold in this world to which positions they have been assigned by god. This gave rise to a state of mind with a perfectionist spirit reminiscent of "an innerworldly asceticism." The cumulative result of these religiously inspired worldly activity was the emergence of a modern technology of rational individual expertise.

Modern Technology was therefore an outgrowth of the culture of the West. Even in the western countries it has been observed that modern technology sometimes runs ahead of some parts of the culture of these societies and it takes some time for the culture to adjust to the demands of the new technology. Sociologists have referred to this phenomena as a cultural lag.

"The thesis is that the various parts of modern culture are not changing at the same rate, some parts are changing much more rapidly than others and that since there is a co-relation and interdependence of parts, a rapid change in one part of our culture requires re-adjustments through other changes in the various co-related parts of culture ." (William F Ogburn, 1922)

In Third World countries, this lag between the material and non-material culture becomes quite pronounced, particularly when the material culture is something introduced from a foreign country. Let us take the introduction of television, the subject matter of this paper. It is easy to set up a Television Transmitting Station in any of the Third World countries. The hardware is manufactured in Developed countries and assembled in a Third World country by technicians of the TV manufacturing company that sells the hardware. The crucial question is, can the Third World country that has acquired this modern piece of technology put it into operation and run it? The running of a modern TV station requires three types of professionals -

- A) Engineers and Technicians
- B) TV Journalists and Producers
- C) Managers and Administrators

In other words the host country should have a community of modern professionals if that country is to benefit from this transfer of

technology. The growth of this cadre of professionals is very much dependent on the existing educational infrastructure. Where there is a good system of formal education, as is now found in most Asian countries, I think the lag between the new technology and the culture to which it is introduced can easily be overcome. A good test of a readiness of a culture to accept a developed technology such as Television is the quickness with which the host country can run the TV station without foreign assistance. This is also a test of a successful transfer of technology from a developed country to a developing country.

For a culture to successfully utilize Television, it is also helpful if the other media of communication is developed in such cultures. For instance, in countries where the print media, radio, film, theatre and advertising have already established a place of importance, it is easy for a new media such as Television to settle down. In my experience of introducing Television to Sri Lanka the fact that the culture had already assigned a place of importance to mass media such as newspapers, radio, film and advertising helped in assimilating the new medium to the established media culture of Sri Lanka. For instance, virtually most of the professionals in engineering, programme production and administration were drawn from among those in the other media, particularly from radio and film. Therefore a modicum of skills necessary for the running of the new medium was already available. This had its disadvantages too in that such persons brought in certain skills and methods of doing things which had to be unlearned in terms of the needs of the new medium. In a sense, there was a certain amount of "trained incapacity" built into the situation when professionals are drawn from other media fields. But overall, I think the experiences in the running of other media organizations was a tremendous help in establishing and running TV in Sri Lanka. From the beginning, TV in Sri Lanka was wholly run by Sri Lankan technicians and producers, and this was possible partly because at the time of introduction of TV Sri Lanka already had a developed mass communication sector.

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I am here, arguing against the conventional thesis that TV or any other advanced technology, borrowed from the West can assist Third World countries to leap-frog to the 21st century of post industrial technology. This is not the experience of Third World countries. TV has the potential for spreading knowledge skills and even basic literacy among a mass audience. But the utilization of TV for such educational purposes, pre-supposes the existence of highly skilled programme producers, technicians and researchers in Third World countries. In other words, at the time of the introduction of TV, such countries should possess an advanced sector of education and mass media which could form the basis for initiating the multiplier effect for which TV has the potential. Further, electricity power should be available cheaply in rural areas of the country where over 80% of the population in Third World countries live. The battery operated TV set is so cumbersome to maintain that in practice it is not a useful medium even when the Government maintains such sets in Community Centres because of problems of technical servicing and maintenance.

The technology of communication influences culture not only by defining new social relationships and social roles. The new technology also affects the psyche of the individuals. As Marshall Mc Luhan points out the media of communication is, in a psychological sense, an extension of man's senses such as the eye and the ear. This affects the way individuals think and act. It alters sense ratios and patterns of perception. To quote Mc Luhan -

"Perhaps the most familiar and pathetic effect of the TV image is the posture of children in early grades. Since TV, children - regardless of eye conditions, average about six and a half inches from the printed page. Our children are striving to carry over to the printed page the all involving sensory mandate of the TV image. With perfect psychomimetic skill they carry out the commands of the TV image. They pour, they probe, they slow down and involve themselves in depth. This is what they had learned

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to do in the cool iconography of the comic book medium. TV carried the process much further. Suddenly they are transferred to the hot print medium with its uniform patterns and fast lineal movement. Pointlessly they strive to read print in depth. They bring to print all their senses and print rejects them. Print ask for the isolated and stripped down visual faculty, not for the unified sensorium." (Marhsall Mc Luhan, 1964, pp.2680-269)

Mc Luhan also points out that the intrusion of the media into the personal and social lives is not affected in any way by the type of culture or stage of civilization. He argues that the spiritual and cultural reservations that people have towards technology does not make any difference to its effects. The effects of technology on culture do not occur at the level of opinion or concepts, but affect sense ratios or patterns of perceptions steadily and without any resistance.

B) The impact of existing (traditional) cultural values on Television

The way a culture utilizes a medium such as Television is also dependent on the existing cultural values and patterns of social relationships in that society. Various groups in society attempt to define the role of TV in terms of their perceptions of social good, to which this medium can be put. Such decisions are based generally on the existing values of that society and in terms of the goals towards which the leaders of such societies want to proceed.

The use of Television in the context of traditional cultural values in a society can sometimes have unintended and deleterious effects on certain segments in society. This is more so in Asian countries, most of which are plural societies with a dominant community and several minority communities. The differences among these communities are based on ethnicity, religion and languages.

Table I shows the cultural plurality in six Asian countries. When traditional values are used to determine the utilization of a mass medium such as Television, it can

TABLE I
CULTURAL PLURALITY OF SIX ASIAN COUNTRIES

BASES OF PLURALITY	COUNTRIES					
	B'DESH	INDIA	MALAYSIA	PAKISTAN	SINGAPORE	SRI LANKA
Ethnicity	.Bengali (98%) .Bihari (2%)	.Indo-Aryan (72%) .Dravidian (25%) .Mongoloid (3%)	.Malay (50%) .Chinese (36%) .Indians (10%) .Other (4%)	.Panjabi (66%) .Sindhi (13%) .Pushtun (8.5%) .Urudu (7.6%) .Baluchi (2.5%) .Others (2.4%)	.Chinese (77%) .Malay (15%) .Indian (6%)	.Sinhalese (75%) .Tamil (18%) .Moor (7%)
Religion	.Moslem (83%) .Hindu (16%) .Other (1%)	.Hindu (83%) .Moslem (11%) .Christian (3%) .Sikh (2%)	.Moslem* .Hindu .Buddhist .Confucian .Taoist .Local-Religions	.Muslim (97%) .Other (3%)	.Buddhism* .Taoism .Islam .Hinduism	.Buddhist (69%) .Hindu (15%) .Christian (7%) .Muslim (7%)
Languages	.Bengali (official) .English	.16 Lges .Hindi (official) .English .English (Associate official)	.Malay (official) .English .Chinese .Indian	.Urudu (official) .English (official)	.Chinese .Malay .Tamil .English (all official)	.Sinhala .Tamil .English

* Percentages not available

Source: World Almanac 1986

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unintentionally surface inherent cleavages among different communities in a society. Under the traditional system of social relationships, such cleavages could have been contained because of the limitation of contact among the communities. Each community lived in a world of its own, governed by its own customs and mores. But Television suddenly hurls these communities together into the vicarious world created by TV programmes. The dormant differences are suddenly aroused. Take for instance, religious groups in a society. One of the basic values that seek expression very early in the life of TV in Third World countries is religious values. Hindu rituals, Buddhist scriptures, the Quran and the Christian sermons, all find their way to TV in the belief that this sort of religious programmes are good for society - that society would somehow be pious, religious and crime free after seeing such programmes. While the manifest purpose may be the good of the society, a latent effect is to arouse communal and religious feelings and pitch community against community. This happens because invariably the values of the dominant community dominate the TV medium. For instance, in predominantly Muslim countries, Muslim programmes dominate, just as much as in predominantly Buddhist, Christian or Hindu countries programmes based on these religions predominate at least on certain holy days if not every day. The minority religious groups naturally feel that their religions are relegated to a second class position. The same applies to different language programmes too. When the language of the dominant group in society predominate in a Television programme, minority language groups feel that they are given a raw deal by the dominant groups in society. Utilization of Television time then becomes a very controversial and hot issue.

Several methods have been used by governments to overcome the problems of sharing Television programme time in plural societies. One way is to allcate Television time based on population ratios of the communities. For instance, if the majority community is 80% of the population and the minority

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community is 20% of the population, time is allocated on the ratio of 8:2. This is not a satisfactory basis, particularly when there are a large number of small minorities. For instance, if a minority comprise 3% of the population, are we to allocate only 3% of the Television time to them? Another solution is to have several national channels catering to the needs of several minority groups. This is very costly and may not be practicable in countries where a large number of small minorities live scattered among the population.

Regional or provincial TV stations, in addition to a national channel, is another model that has been followed by certain countries. In India for instance, Doordarshan has, in addition to national Television, State TV stations which cater to the needs of the population in the several States in the languages of these States.

All these solutions tend to strengthen the existing traditional social cleavages in terms of religions, languages and communities. They are, in my view, examples of how the existing culture dictate the uses to which an entirely new technological innovation is put. By such a use, Television tends to magnify the differences among these cultures and the sub-cultures and bring to the surface, sociological problems rooted in the traditional values of these communities. It can sometimes create nativistic movements of the several sub-cultures present in the plural societies of Third World Asia. In this situation, the leaders of these communities use the concept of 'tradition' to legitimize marginalization. They argue for cultural uniqueness in order to perpetuate their power or the power of the groups to which they belong. (Jan Servaes, 1986)

When Television is introduced to a Third World country, it is necessary therefore to be aware of the impact that traditional values may have on the utilization of this medium. It can work to entrench traditional inequitable social relationships in the name of cultural uniqueness. From the point of view of disadvantaged minority communities, it could spell a form of a 'cultural imperialism' of a domestic nature which is as

deleterious as one attributed to foreign countries. Therefore, along with the introduction of a new medium such as Television, the governments of these countries should also give thought to the fostering of a set of values and norms that could assist in the modernization of these countries. These should be universal values that favour human social development rather than particularistic, traditional values which strive to keep the uniqueness of cultural groups. In my view, Television in Third World Countries should reject values that destroy the cohesion of the country by over-emphasising religious, linguistic or tribal uniqueness of a nostalgic past. Unless an emphasis is placed on universal values and an open society, Television might end up by giving an opportunity to extremist groups who, using traditional, particularistic values, seize every opportunity to force down on others, their views. Television under such a situation will breed intolerance and repressions of opposite views. (Goonasekera, 1985)

C. The impact of Television programmes on Cultural Values

The most visible form of cultural domination and penetration through Television in Third World countries is in the import and dissemination of Television programmes from foreign countries. For instance, Well (1972) has analysed how Latin American Television acts as an importer of cultural and commercial values of the United States and supports the interests of large American Companies through the telecasting of a large number of American TV programmes. Apart from the actual telecasting of foreign material in Third World Television, there are two other ways in which programme content can bring the cultural values of Third World countries in contact with foreign cultures. One is through media production arrangements with foreign collaborators. This entails financial and organizational arrangements between the host country of the Third World and the collaborating foreign country. For instance, it is now possible for a country to collaborate with the producers of Sesame Street to produce a

selected number of episodes of Sesame Street in a Third World country. The cost of production will have to be borne by the host country. In return, the host country and hopefully its culture, will be featured in a popular and prestigious international Television production.

Second is through the acceptance of a body of values as guiding the ideal practice of Television. These values are used in guiding the production standards of software, the management of Television organization and the general evaluation of Television programmes. As Jan Servaes observe, "It is in the software, management and evaluation domains that the threat to cultural autonomy and local adaptations are most acute because once a nation 'accepts another's concepts of what constitute 'professional', 'responsible' or 'appropriate' use of any communication medium, its room for cultural adaptation and experimentation may be seriously compromised. Values of practice can be either explicit and visible rules of behaviour in media organizations or implicit assumptions. Examples of values of practice include the idealized principles of 'objectivity' and 'impartiality' in news reporting; assumption about the most appropriate forms of technology for specific media tasks (for instance in encouraging the adaption of educational TV by developing countries); assumptions about what constitute a 'good' TV series. (1986, pp.307)

We could therefore identify three mechanisms through which the export and dissemination of western values in the production of Third World TV programmes could take place. One is through the institutional transfers such as in joint productions between a western country and a Third World country. The second is through training and education given to Third World TV producers in western countries or through western educated teachers. Third is through the diffusion of occupational ideologies such as professionalism, division of work and entry qualifications to a profession. (See Golding, 1977) While these methods of cultural

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penetration remain very pervasive in Third World societies, much has been said about 'cultural imperialism' through the transmission of foreign material in Television, that it is useful to look at this question separately. Cultural imperialism in its most extreme form refers to the huge influx of foreign material, particularly from the developed countries of the west into the mass media of the Third World. It is argued that in the face of this media invasion, the indigenous cultures of the Third World disintegrate consistently and without resistance. Further, with the advent of advanced communication technologies such as Direct Broadcast Satellites (DBS) this process of acculturation will be taken to its logical end where cultural autonomy will disappear and the countries of the Third World will move towards a universal telematic culture in a world republic of Technology. The culture which emerges in this process is a mass culture oriented towards marketability, parasitic, spurious, mass produced and appealing to the lowest common denominator with the audience. (Greenberg, 1957) Even the most virulent advocate of cultural imperialism approach now recognize that the concept has many shortcomings and has to be examined in terms of the empirical evidence available in Third World countries.

The reason for the over-dependence of a Third World Television station on imported programmes is not some conspiracy by developed western countries to invade the cultures of the Third World as some theorists of cultural imperialism make us believe. Nor is it the popularity of foreign programmes, particularly US productions in Third World countries. Such programmes are only popular among a minority of Western educated urban elites in these countries. Surveys in Indonesia, Taiwan and Sri Lanka indicate that at least as far as rural audiences are concerned, foreign programmes from the west, which sometimes fill a considerable amount of time, are the least watched. (Bitterman, 1985, Goonasekera, 1984) It is the local language programmes that attract huge audiences. This is because the ease of understanding and the closeness of the experiences of the events

in the programme to everyday life of the local audiences. The reason for the predominance of foreign material on TV of Third World countries is three-fold. First is the high cost of local productions when compared with the cost of foreign material. A Third World country in Asia can buy a good BBC or US programme for around \$ 200.00 per thirty minute episode whereas a similar local production would cost over US \$ 2000.00.

Second is the lack of trained staff - production and engineering staff to do 7 to 8 hours of Television daily in Third World countries. Few Third World countries have the production capability of even doing 50% of programmes to fill the telecast time available.

Third is the lack of will and determination of the management and governments of Third World countries to increase the level of local productions. As a recent UNESCO report has observed, due to reasons of economy, those who manage the media, whether public servants or businessmen "look for the cheapest time fillers which can often be equated with the lowest common denominator in consumer taste." (UNESCO, 1973, P.21) Therefore in this so-called cultural invasion, there is complicity of the governments and media professionals of Third World countries. As Bitterman points out, "The villain view of culture exaggerate the power of the media as well as the arbitrariness and destructiveness of its influence and it ignores the necessary complicity of cultures in the process of changes." (1985) Far from being a top-down phenomena only, mass media interact with local networks. There is a give and take in this process of interaction. Nor is the audience passive recipients of foreign material. The audiences are actively involved in interpreting and giving meaning to the media programmes they consume. Foreign cultural items can give rise to two tendencies - one is to develop cheap local imitations such as is found in the Japanese version of US Westerns. The other is to use imported media

technology to forge a different culture independent of the western ones. This is the challenge for Third World Television producers. As Ithiel de Sola Pool points out, any introduction of foreign material can change the culture of Third World countries somewhat. This makes conservatives in these societies unhappy. "But insofar as it teaches the receivers, it enhances their knowledge, their capabilities and their potential autonomy." (1977, p.146) The influence of Television on cultural values is a more complex process than what the advocates of cultural imperialism make it out to be. It is an interactive process where the traditional culture of the Third World countries influence the uses of Television in these countries just as much as Television in turn influence and change cultural values. I think the key to the successful cultural adoption of Television in a Third World country is how quickly such countries can promote and develop a viable local industry of Television productions. This is dependent on the availability of TV professionals, financial resources and a market big enough to make such a production venture worthwhile. India for instance, with its huge market and resources can easily embark on a successful TV production programme. Can a small country such as Sri Lanka or the Maldives with its small internal markets embark on an ambitious production of TV programmes? This is a challenge that the policy makers of these countries will have to face. One possible solution may be to embark on joint productions among the neighbouring countries of the region. This will require the active support of the governments of these countries. With regional groupings such as SAARC and ASEAN, such cooperation may not be difficult.

In the final analysis, the successful cultural assimilation of a new medium such as Television will depend on the cultural values that it helps to develop and foster in society. While helping to preserve cultural uniqueness based on history and tradition

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television in Third World countries should help to build new values of a consensual culture based on tolerance and understanding. Such a culture will uphold the values so aptly described by Jawaharlal Nehru in the following lines.

"Let us be a little humble;
Let us think that the truth may
not perhaps be entirely with us.
Let us cooperate with others;
Let us even when we do not appreciate
what others say, respect
Their views and their ways of life."

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