

WANTED: A MEDIA POLICY FOR SRI LANKA

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Some years ago, as Chairman of the Presidential Committee on the Film Industry of Sri Lanka, I urged the need for a National Media Policy for Sri Lanka. This proposal evoked either bemusement or outright rejection. The reason for this negative and hostile reaction can be attributed to a general misapprehension regarding the nature and purpose of a National Media Policy.

Critics of the media policy idea perceive it as giving yet another handle to the state to enlarge its hold and tighten its control over the media. Others argue that a media policy already exists in the form of the various pieces of legislation covering such basic areas as radio, television, newspapers and cinema. They say that the different Acts of Parliament together constitute a full and complete media policy statement.

Neither argument is valid. A media policy is not an instrument of coercion or control by the state. Rather, a media policy is a rationalisation and consolidation of the national framework for the development of the country's media in a systematic, ordered fashion which is also responsive to felt needs. The existing Acts of Parliament do not add up to a policy in the overall sense of the term. An Act either define the powers and functions of the several state agencies active in the media field or indicate the rules governing the media. By no stretch of the imagination can these Acts be recognised as amounting to a media policy.

The aims and objectives of a media policy are perhaps best understood through an actual event – an event that

illustrates what may happen in a country in the absence of a media policy. The introduction of television to Sri Lanka is a most striking case in point. When "Rupavahini" made its appearance back in the early 80s, the media most directly affected by television – radio and cinema – were totally unprepared for the new situation. Consequently, radio had to go through a period of painful (and sometimes agonising) reappraisal before coming to terms with its changed role. The travails of the cinema were far more agonising. The film industry saw its economic base flounder and crumble before its very eyes within one year of the speedy diffusion of television. Unlike radio, however, the film industry is yet to recover from the drastic impact of the new medium.

The moral is clear. The unfortunate effects of television on radio and cinema could have been considerably reduced and in some instances altogether eliminated, if a coherent media policy had been operative in this country at that particular moment. Both radio and cinema would have been able to withstand the new medium's onslaught without suffering excessive disorientation and loss. An active media policy would have prepared the existing mass media to cope with the vastly altered environment brought about by the advent of the new medium.

A properly formulated media policy would have alerted both radio and cinema to the fact that the arrival of an extremely powerful medium such as television signals new problems and challenges for the existing mass media. This

is something that all mass media practitioners and policy-makers should have learnt from the historical experience of other countries.

One of the principal functions of a media policy is to achieve a holistic view of the media scene, taking into account the inter-relationships and cross-influences that link the different media into one extensive, all-enveloping network. This function alone amply justifies the call for a national media policy, since both the public and the officialdom are given to the erroneous view that the media exist in watertight compartments, isolated from each other.

To insist that media are plural is not to be grammatically fastidious but to underline a tangible reality. And this reality, stated in the simplest manner, is that the media world is occupied by a number of diverse channels of communication which disburse information and shape opinion. These channels are not necessarily in harmony with each other. To use the earlier example, television and cinema are both mass media; both are audio-visual, with emphasis on the visual. This means that cinema and television battle for the same audience. In this struggle, the electronic medium generally emerges triumphant because, among other things, it brings entertainment direct to the home.

In the context of television, therefore, the cinema requires special care and extra support. The cinema must be enabled to occupy fresh ground, and compete with television while retaining its identity. Or, to put it another way, cinema cannot be taken in isolation, or treated as an independent unit, without reference to television and, of course, to video. This principle applies to all the media, print or broadcast, mechanical or electronic.

A media policy, then sees the media spectrum as a whole, as a large and growing organism with separate limbs, yet interacting with each other all the time.

The wide, all-embracing viewpoint generated and sustained by a national media policy is important on several counts. One of these – that is how the

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different media can economically affect each other – has already been noted, with reference to cinema and television. Given that the media spectrum is constantly expanding, this economic relationship is fluid. Thus, for instance, the arrival of a third channel for broadcast television will inevitably impinge upon the economic fortunes of both ITN and Rupavahini, impelling these two institutions to re-vamp their programming to meet the new competition. Will the programming improve as a result or will it decline? Will the current financial, technical, artistic resources of ITN and Rupavahini suffice for this purpose? If not, how is the extra support to be found? Such questions need to be asked, and they can best be asked within the parameters of a national media policy.

It is perhaps clichetic to say that a media policy should be future-oriented. Nevertheless, one must insist upon this matter. The media world is never static. Hourly, daily it is acquiring new technologies; information and entertainment are becoming profit-oriented enterprises with a global sweep. CNN is an intimation of things to come in the 21st century.

Is it possible for a tiny national entity like Sri Lanka to preserve its self-hood under such conditions? Only a well thought out media policy can provide an answer, and an executable plan of action.

But the best argument for a media policy in the Sri Lankan context lies in the fact that a media policy will open eyes, and guide practitioners, policy makers and analysts to see the totality. At least, it will rid us of those media pundits who talk about the responsibilities of the press (i.e. the newspapers) in finding solutions to national problems while completely ignoring the role played by radio, television, video and cinema in: