The Mahatma didn't like the movies and why it matters

Indian broadcasting policy, 1920s–1990s

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the ideological and structural foundations of Indian broadcasting policy as it developed from the 1920s to the 1990s. The article argues that the failure of Indian governments to make the most of radio and television for economic and social development stemmed from three sources: (i) the restrictive policies inherited from a colonial state; (ii) the puritanism of the Gandhian national movement; and (iii) the fear, made vivid by the 1947 partition, of inflaming social conflict. The policies and institutions established in the 1940s and 1950s shaped Indian broadcasting for the next 40 years and have been significantly subverted only since 1992 as a result of the transformation effected by satellite television.

KEY WORDS

broadcasting ■ censorship ■ Gandhi ■ India ■ policy ■ satellite TV

Superficially at least, India's listless broadcasting policy was surprising. Jawaharlal Nehru, who shaped government for 17 years after independence in 1947, was widely read, knew of developments elsewhere and admired aspects of the Soviet Union, where the use of newspapers and film for state goals had received great attention and investment. From the 1950s, radio in the USSR had also been widely used (Hopkins, 1970: 244–5).¹ Elsewhere too, radio and television became important aspects of national life far earlier than in India. In China the Shanghai Television University was founded in 1960 to put TV sets in every classroom of the Shanghai region (*Shanghai Teaching University*, n.d.: 11). In the Philippines, where the first radio station broadcast in 1922, there were five stations when the Second World War began (Lent, n.d.: 79–82;

Medija, n.d.). India, 20 times more populous, had nine stations in 1939 (Baruah, 1983: 233–42).² In Indonesia the Dutch connections with the Philips electrical company gave an early impetus to radio. By the late 1930s the whole archipelago was covered by signals originating from more than 20 stations in eight cities with broadcasts 'from early morning until midnight' (Mrazek, 2002: 165–8). The Japanese, when they conquered the Netherlands East Indies in 1942, 'discovered a richly developed, pluralist tradition of radio broadcasting, with indigenous-owned and -run stations spread throughout the main urban centers' (Kitley, 2000: 28–9).³

The spread of broadcast radio does not necessarily make people happier or more democratic. Asked to gauge the political 'success' of India, Indonesia and the Philippines in the second half of the 20th century, most people would probably award the palm to India. But radio's popularity appears to affect the propagation of a common, accepted language. Radio, one analyst asserted, has 'taught them [the Filipinos] the national language' (Lent, n.d.: 88). In Indonesia, the Dutch permitted 'loyal', conservative Indonesians to run radio stations using the Dutch imperial infrastructure before the Second World War, and this 'Eastern radio was tuned to Eastern listeners'. The language was intended to communicate with an audience throughout the archipelago, and the Japanese encouraged this development by giving Indonesian nationalist leaders access to radio to speak to the people (Kitley, 2000: 24; Mrazek, 2002: 182–3; Nugroho, 1957: 27).

In both the Philippines and Indonesia, acceptance of a 'national language' since independence has been remarkably widespread in comparison with the development of Hindi, India's national language. In India, more than 15 years after independence, 'the basic issue' remained whether 'the language used in A[ll] I[ndia] R[adio]'s Hindi news bulletins is understood by the vast majority of the people for whom they are intended'. Jawaharlal Nehru 'complained that he could not understand the language in which his Hindi speeches were reported . . . !' (Awasthy, 1965: 132, 135). In Hindi-speaking areas, the language used on AIR was elite, highly sanskritized and difficult to understand. South India in any case was often resistant to Hindi, a language of the north, and AIR's style of Hindi, and its programming, did little to erode resistance. It was the arrival in the 1990s of satellite television, and its popular entertainment, that began to make Hindi acceptable to more of India.

The decade of the 1950s, sometimes called the golden age of Indian films, was a dark age for Indian radio. Modelled neither on the BBC with an autonomous board, nor on the US industry with commercial adver-

tising sponsoring programme production and station building, radio in India was starved of funds. Politicians and officials welcomed control of it as a privilege of high office, but did not understand its strengths or limitations. Films, on the other hand, financed by private investors, depended on paying audiences and had a vital and incessant conversation with their publics through the box office. In 1980 India had only 20 million radios, but movie audiences were estimated at 65 million people a week (Awasthy, 1965: 259; *Fifty Years of Indian Talkies*, 1981: appendices; *Mass Media in India, 1980–81*, 1981: 193). Whatever the defects of films, they captivated hundreds of millions and crossed language boundaries more often than any other form of communication.

The two media – film and broadcast radio – have a basic difference which leads them into different relationships with governments. Radio frequency is physically limited. The electromagnetic ‘highway’ suitable for broadcast purposes is not wide enough for an infinite number of audible signals. Film-making, on the other hand, is limitless – as long as there are cameras, film, film-makers and money to support them. As radio developed around the world in the 1920s, governments were forced to regulate the allocation of radio spectrum to prevent cacophony. In the USA, the Radio Act of 1927 established a Federal Radio Commission to licence companies to use specific frequencies (Starr, 2004: 342–3, 360).⁴ In India, a foreign government reluctantly took over radio to control an unpredictable and potentially troublesome medium. Films had no technical need for, or possibility of, such close regulation; provided their content was not inflammatory and their exhibition halls paid taxes, they could be left to look after themselves. Indian films gained a reputation for conjuring up the dreams of ordinary people seeking escape from hard lives; Indian radio by the 1950s was more likely to be regarded as part of the dreariness of daily life from which people were trying to escape.⁵

For men and women dedicated to the transformation of their country – in Gandhi’s words, wiping the tear from every eye – the leaders of the Indian National Congress devoted surprisingly little attention to communications. Gandhi himself was both a master journalist and an instinctive communicator through pre-modern channels. His dress, his speech and the nature of his travels and campaigns resonated subtly with the expectations of millions of Indians. Yet Gandhi and the men and women he inspired gave little thought to the potential of the new media of film, recordings and radio in carrying messages of the nation and its rebirth to ordinary people. Innovation in these spheres came primarily in film and from men and women with

backgrounds in commerce and courtly entertainment. Broadcasting was largely ignored. When the Chanda Committee reported scathingly about Indian broadcasting in 1966, the foreign-exchange commitment to the electronic industries, on which broadcasting depended, had been reduced by 30 percent in 10 years (Chanda Report, 1966: 38). Ten years after independence, fewer than one in five villages, where 85 percent of the population lived, had a radio (*National Sample Survey*, 1966: 16).⁶

Television was regarded as an unnecessary luxury, and radio simply as a megaphone: a device by which the cultured could preach lofty ideals to the lowly. A former Director-General of AIR captured this spirit: ‘If cinema has been able to achieve its present pre-eminence as a result of private enterprise [people sometimes asked], why should radio and TV not be permitted to flower in the same way?’ He answered his own question: ‘For the intelligentsia the example of the film industry is an argument against commercialisation of broadcasting . . . Broadcasting is expected to serve national objectives some of which may not be commercially paying’.

The film industry was notable for ‘corruption . . . black money, and vulgarity’ (Chatterji, 1991: 192–3) and therefore was not the sort of institution by which to uplift the nation. But the nation of popular Hindi and classical music was not the nation of most Indians. A medium that seldom spoke to them seldom attracted them.

This article tries to show how the austerity of the Gandhian ethos, the conveniently restrictive policies inherited from the imperial rulers, and a fear of enflaming a delicately plural society combined to deprive Indian broadcasting of finance, energy and imagination.

Colonial legacy

It would have taken a great effort to have snapped Indian radio out of its colonial structures after 1947. This straitjacket was stitched from various threads: the need of authoritarian foreign rulers to control information; the commitment, stemming from the British model, to keep control of the airwaves in the hands of the state; and the reluctance of a colonial regime to devote revenue to anything that appeared unnecessary or frivolous. Censorship of films had been introduced from the time of the First World War to control ‘sexual content’, particularly involving Europeans, and the ‘portrayal of crime’, and from the 1930s was directed against nationalist political statements (*Evidence to Indian Cinematograph Committee*, 1928, vol. 1: 105–44, cited in Shoesmith, 1989). The fears that inspired film censorship applied similarly to radio.

The new medium of radio seemed an additional problem for a colonial state preoccupied from the 1920s with a national movement transformed by Gandhi. The first broadcasting was done by private radio clubs in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in 1923–4, and the first radio stations with a regular schedule were opened as a commercial venture in Bombay and Calcutta in 1927 (Chatterji, 1991: 39; Gupta, 1995: 2–6). In contrast, by that seminal year, radio was in one-quarter of homes in the USA and ‘a primary medium of popular entertainment’ (Starr, 2004: 348). Under the provisions of the US Radio Act of 1927, large corporations quickly pushed aside non-commercial broadcasters, like universities or community groups (Starr, 2004: 342–3). In Britain, the British Broadcasting Commission, a different model, came into existence under the legendary John Reith in 1927 (Awasthy, 1965: 1; Briggs and Burke, 2002: 220–2).⁷

In India these were less formative years with little enthusiasm for radio and no queue of investors. The Indian Broadcasting Company collapsed in 1930, unable to generate enough listeners willing to buy radios and unable to collect its only sources of revenue – licence fees and slices of the import duty on radio equipment. The government of India required the company itself to collect both taxes. Such unenthusiastic support belied the words of Irwin, the Viceroy, when he opened the Bombay station: ‘broadcasting will be a blessing and a boon . . . Both for entertainment and for education its possibilities are great, and as yet we perhaps scarcely realise how great they are’ (Chatterji, 1991: 39–40). Reith, the creator of the BBC, later wrote that radio in India had been ‘without official support or interest’ and because of this, ‘a great opportunity had been lost’ (quoted in Awasthy, 1965: 2; Gupta, 1995: 11–16).

The British Government of India stumbled complainingly into broadcasting. It took over the failed Indian Broadcasting Company’s two stations but tried to close them in 1931, blaming the stringencies of the world economic depression. The stations survived, and the creation of the BBC’s shortwave service from London at the end of 1932 led to an increase in the purchase of radios and thus to the revenue from licence fees (Gupta, 1995: 6–7). Reith’s pestering of Willingdon, Viceroy from 1930 to 1935, led to a reluctant decision by the Government of India to set up a third radio station in Delhi, employ a Controller of Broadcasting on loan from the BBC and begin to build a number of other stations. Lionel Fielden, the idiosyncratic new controller, concluded that the government was ‘acting from duty rather than pleasure’ (quoted in Zivin, 1999: 198).⁸ By the time Fielden left India in 1940, he had become

an acquaintance of Nehru, Gandhi and other nationalist leaders, had got endorsement of the name All India Radio (AIR) and overseen the opening of stations in six other towns, in addition to Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi. There were said to be 100,000 radio households in a population of 400 million people (perhaps one radio for every 700 households) (Chanda Report, 1966: 16).⁹

Apprehensive imperialist governments were not the only thing standing in the way of the expansion of radio. Most of India lacked electricity until the early 1970s, and the batteries for radios were cumbersome and expensive until the transistor radio came into widespread use in the 1960s (Chanda Report, 1966: 129, 131). Advocates of rural radio in India in the 1930s, who tended to be Indian idealists (or calculating Europeans), took ‘the Soviet example’ as a model of what could be done to educate and improve illiterate rural folk. A limited number of durable, single-frequency radios, entrusted to reliable local authorities, could reach whole villages by loudspeaker. The idea had enthusiastic champions, but not among the influential, and it died away (Zivin, 1998: 725).

The exigencies of the Second World War reinforced the culture and the structures that enabled ‘authorities’ – whether politicians or officials – to control radio. British officials reclaimed control of provincial governments from elected Indian politicians in October 1939, and the war justified mechanisms of censorship for all media and particularly for AIR. Such censorship included ‘government-inspired attacks on Indian leaders of the Congress Party such as Gandhi and Nehru as being pro-Japanese’ (Fleay and Sanders, 1989: 509). Examples of using radio to denigrate one’s enemies and promote oneself were established; they proved hard to abandon after independence.

When India became independent in 1947, AIR inherited 14 radio stations, a shortwave service, a developed bureaucracy and a mechanism for official censorship (Awasthy, 1965: 11).¹⁰ It was, in short, a government department. ‘Broadcasting’, Fielden wrote in 1937, ‘must . . . above all other things, be impartial; it must also be . . . agile, elastic and adaptable . . . But a Government Department . . . can be neither’ (*Indian Listener*, 7 January 1937, quoted in Zivin, 1999: 161–2). British civil servants, however, had stressed ‘the undoubted dangers [of radio] and the necessity for a very careful guidance’ (Haig, 1927). The official mechanisms that they created suited the first Minister of Information and Broadcasting in independent India – the redoubtable Vallabhbhai Patel (1875–1950), who, as Deputy Prime Minister, Home and States Minister, had other preoccupations and saw radio as a branch of

government.¹¹ The AIR bureaucracy was geared to keep radio under close control, and the state-centred economic policies of post-independence Indian governments gave a rationale for maintaining such control. This tempting drug was hard for politicians to foreswear, and its use reached a climax during Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's 'emergency' of 1975–77.

The Mahatma, the movies and Congress's attitudes to media

India in 1947 inherited a national radio system shaped by the needs of an authoritarian colonial government but aware of a public-broadcasting ethos originating from the BBC. With independence this legacy came under the control of the Congress Party, which brought to media policy its own experience, ideas and prejudices. Influential policy-makers in the new government were not at home with film, radio and recordings. Some were suspicious and even hostile to aspects of AIR's programming that hitherto had proved popular. In one of Vallabhbhai Patel's first actions as Minister, even before independence, he instructed that no one whose 'private life was a public scandal' should be given work at AIR. This rule, which never applied to men, effectively banned popular Muslim women singers who were deemed to be courtesans (Luthra, 1986: 105, 162, 305). In the eyes of many members of the Gandhian Congress, 'entertainment' was culturally tainted. It could suggest courtesans, prostitution and Muslim influence (Keskar, 1967: 7; Neuman, 1980: 216). John Reith's alleged 'high browism' at the BBC paled in comparison.

Patel and others took their cue from the Mahatma who, though a master communicator, was sceptical of anything that appeared to be 'advertising'. When interviewed by Fox Filmtone News in April 1931, he began by saying:

I do not like this kind of thing, but I shall reconcile myself to it, if not more than a few minutes have to be given. Although I know this sort of enterprise will advertise you, which is your primary object, I know also that it will serve to advertise the cause which I represent – India's independence. I do not discount the value of propaganda. I have been described as the greatest propagandist in the world. I may deserve the compliment. But my propaganda is unlike the ordinary. It is that of truth which is self-propagating. Truth abhors artificiality (*Hindu*, 1 May 1931: 16).

When he went to Britain a few months later and was taken to meet Charlie Chaplin, he had to be told who Chaplin was (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, n.d., vol 53: 393). He appears to have seen only one film – *Ramrajya* in Bombay in June 1944. 'So far as I know', he wrote to a cousin consoling her about the frivolous habits of a young man:

I am the only person who has never seen a film. But no, I did go once, not knowing what the thing was about, and saw a film about the exile of Janaki and Ramachandra. It was a depressing experience and I felt like running away from the place, but could not do so. It was sheer waste of time. (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, n.d., vol. 95: 380)

We might infer that *Ramrajya*, released 1943, irritated Gandhi on three counts: it was (i) extravagant, (ii) a musical, and (iii) it was on a religious theme. Based on the story of Lord Ram's return with Sita from Lanka, *Ramrajya* had 'big-budget art direction' and a 'final battle with fire[-]spewing magical arrows'. The fact that the 'Gandhian sympathies' of the director, Vijay Bhatt (1907–93), were said to have led him to take up religious themes did not impress Gandhi (Rajadhyaksha and Williams, 1999: 63–4, 299). For him, film, radio and recording ranked as distractions and temptations, capable of diverting people from the national quest for freedom and reformation.

It is significant for broadcasting policy that three of his stalwart devotees held the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting for the first 15 years of independence: Vallabhbhai Patel himself from 1947 to 1950, R.R. Diwakar (1894–1990) from 1950 to 1952 (having been the junior minister under Vallabhbhai) and the legendary Dr B.V. Keskar (1903–1984) from 1952 to 1962. It is worth examining each man. Vallabhbhai Patel's reputation as a committed follower of Gandhi after his 'conversion' from a brandy-drinking, bridge-playing, suit-wearing lawyer at the time of the First World War is well known. Thereafter, he embraced the Gandhian way completely – spinning, khadi, vegetarianism – and the puritanical ethic that went with Gandhi's programme (Weber, 2004: 145–51).

R.R. Diwakar, who succeeded Patel, was, if possible, more committed to Gandhian ideas than Gandhi himself. A Brahmin, educated in Pune, the high-caste cultural capital of western India, he began his working life as a college lecturer in English before joining the first non-cooperation movement against the British in 1920 when he was imprisoned for the first time. He became one of the staunch middle-level leaders of the Gandhian nationalist movement. After leaving legislative politics at the first general elections of 1951–52, he was appointed a state Governor and then 'dedicated himself to his first love, transmitting the message of Gandhi ... all over the world' through organizations like the Gandhi Peace Foundation (*Gandhi Marg*, 1990: 511; 1991: 467–77).

Diwakar's successor at Information and Broadcasting had a similar background. B.V. Keskar was to stay in the job for 10 years and acquire a reputation for high-brow interference. Also a Maratha Brahmin born in

Pune, Keskar was educated in Banaras and at the University of Paris in the 1930s (Lelyveld, 1994: 119–21). He too entered the Gandhian nationalist movement at the time of non-cooperation in 1921 and later occupied significant positions in the Indian National Congress. He had a particular interest in foreign affairs, an unusual attribute in the Congress in these years. He had travelled widely in Europe and a little in Southeast Asia by the time he took over at the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in 1952 (*India Who's Who 1950*: 30, 52–3). It was, however, a mark of his slight political influence that he did not have cabinet rank from 1952 to 1957, and Information and Broadcasting was downgraded to the status of Minister of State between 1957 and 1962 (Chanda Report, 1966: 70–1; *Council of Ministers, 1947–89*, 1990: 69; Luthra, 1986: 160). Keskar's critics claimed that 'he seldom gave a hearing to those with whom he did not agree ... maintained autocratic control in areas where he was personally interested' and was the author of 'a number of ill-conceived plans and poorly executed schemes' (Awasthy, 1965: 225–6). The commission of inquiry into broadcasting, which Keskar long resisted and was instituted only after Indira Gandhi became the Information and Broadcasting Minister in 1964, noted more temperately that 'successive Ministers usurped the policy-making functions of the directorate-general and started interfering even in matters of programme planning and presentation' (Chanda Report, 1966: 51).¹²

The first three Ministers were upper-caste Gandhians and well-credentialed veterans of the nationalist movement. We may infer that they inherited Gandhi's fears and doubts that the new media could contribute positively to the new India. The Chanda Report concluded that to such people 'television is an expensive luxury intended for the entertainment of the affluent society and ... should be left alone until our plans of economic development have been completed' (1966: 199).

And radio suffered from a failure of governing elites, such as those on the Planning Commission who determined where investment would be made, to understand that engaging, well-produced radio 'can mobilize human resources and enlist the active and informed cooperation of the people' (Chanda Report, 1966: 38). But why should Nehru and his associates, who were influenced by the USSR and other foreign places, have adopted such an attitude? For them, it appears, electricity came before radio or anything like it, and electricity would come from the full-scale industrialization that was the goal of the first 15 years of independence.

If politicians contemplated how to use a medium like radio, the model in their minds was that of the 'bullet theory' – have a message,

fire it and expect the target to be hit. This expectation – and the lack of thought about media that underlay it – is captured in one of Nehru's letters to state Chief Ministers in 1953. Having just returned from opening a dam and a power station, he was proud of the achievements but despondent at how few Indians recognized them:

The sight of these works filled me ... with a sense of achievement. They are mighty works of which any country can be proud. And yet, how many of us ... realize the greatness of these undertakings ... ?

... I am anxious that we should reach our people in the villages as well as in the towns with some kind of a record of the work ... Ultimately, what counts is the approach to our rural millions. I have come to feel more and more that that approach should be visual and through documentary films ... We have not explored this avenue enough, although it is the obvious method of approach ... among people who are largely illiterate. I think our Film Division of the Central Government, our Planning Commission and our State Governments, should co-operate in putting about the numerous developmental activities ... We should definitely aim now at educating our village folk through films. (Nehru, 1987, vol. 3: 253–4)

Nehru envisaged mobile vans carrying the nation-building documentaries from village to village (as video vans did 30 years later). But he gave no thought to radio and no consideration to the fact that audiences had to *want* to watch. Firing bullets achieves nothing if they miss the target. Nor did Nehru seem daunted at the enormity of trying to orchestrate the Film Division, the Planning Commission and the state governments in an artistic endeavour like film-making.

The nervous junior public servants of All India Radio, who carried out the political and cultural wishes of the Minister, sucked life out of programming. A listener survey in the 1950s found 'nine out of ten houses in every street ... tuned to [Radio] Ceylon, and the receiver in the tenth house was ... out of order' (Awasthy, 1965: 54).¹³ Eventually in 1957, as evidence mounted of a decline in audience numbers at a time when India's population was growing at 2.5 percent a year, a new station, devoted to light music and even film music, was introduced, which won back some listeners (Luthra, 1986: 310).¹⁴ But media policy remained in the hands of an uninfluential minister seeking to implement a policy of high culture with little thought about other goals for electronic media. 'We reveal', one insider wrote, 'our lack of initiative and our incapacity to create organisations appropriate to our needs' (Masani, 1985: 1).¹⁵

Unbottled genies

There was a third reason for tight, central control of media. Fear of repeating the bloodshed of partition – and further division of India – was used to justify various forms of censorship, caution and control. The British had also been fond of citing the need for censorship to prevent riots and communal disturbance. 'Censorship is necessary in India', the *Indian Cinematograph Committee* (1927) concluded, to prevent 'the import, production and public exhibition of films which might demoralise morals, hurt religious susceptibilities or excite communal or racial animosities'. Radio came to be regarded as having all the potential of word-of-mouth rumour and street-corner rabble-rousing to incite disaffection and violence. Station managers were so sensitive that one wrote to the Director-General seeking advice about whether a version of a national song that referred to 300 million Indians ought to go to air, since the population of India at that time was 400 million and the missing 100 million might be construed as being that portion of the population who were Muslims. This was taken as 'an indication of the communal passions and suspicions then rife' (Luthra, 1986: 185).

In an India with an illiteracy rate of more than 80 percent, and a daily newspaper penetration of no more than 7 newspapers per 1000 people (Jeffrey, 2003: 47–9), print could do limited damage. But radio and film, though they might provide a way of connecting with 'the masses', could as easily inflame as educate. Colonial officials saw evidence of 'the heat generated by religion' when it interacted with radio in an incident in 1943 when one Muslim sect cut the line that linked the broadcast of a rival's festival to the transmitter (Luthra, 1986: 349). In a south Indian state in the 1980s, the start of a television news broadcast in Urdu – a north Indian language now associated with Muslims – led to riotous protests in which more than 30 people were killed (Ghose, 2005: 195). A 1980 report justified censorship:

in ... a hyper-conservative society like India, which has rigid social and religious norms of behaviour, where the political consciousness has still not matured and where harsh economic conditions inhibit individual growth, there are bound to be serious limitations on the freedom of expression. (*Report of the Working Group on National Film Policy*, 1980: 74)

The timidity that this engendered discouraged timely, credible reporting and provided an excuse for constant political intervention. When live current affairs broadcasts were attempted on television in the early 1990s, the Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, had them cancelled within days. 'We cannot have live broadcasts,' he told the television

network's boss. 'It is too dangerous' (Ghose, 2005: 189). This was echoed by the Minister of Information and Broadcasting 10 years later. Justifying the ban on newscasts on FM radio, Priya Das Munshi argued that:

the news broadcast on [radio] ... is considered the last word and has unmatched credibility. Therefore it is our duty to see that the news being broadcast on radio is correct and does not provoke any section of the society. Our challenge is greater than any other country. (Munshi, 2006)

Both politicians were publicly proclaiming the dangers to society of inflammatory words and false information. But both also had in mind the dangers of forceful criticism of the Congress Party. 'Timid in reporting', AIR became 'a purveyor of stale news' by hapless reporters who assumed any important story 'should be cleared with authorities' to determine how and whether it should go to air (Chanda Report, 1966: 96–7).

Thus the structures of authoritarian control inherited from British rule combined with Gandhian asceticism and fears about India's inflammable social fabric. They produced an environment in which radio's potential to communicate and educate was stifled, and television was regarded as an extravagance and an even greater danger than radio. Few embraced the enthusiastic view of the Chanda Report that radio could help achieve 'the liberation of the human mind, spreading knowledge and techniques necessary for progress and prosperity' (1966: 38). As a result, radio made little contribution towards the popularizing of a national language (compared, for example, with Indonesia and the Philippines). Similarly, transfer of information and awareness among the population proceeded more slowly than an aggressive and imaginative policy of entertainment and news reporting might have achieved.

All 'Indira' Radio, 1964–1984 and beyond

It is ironic that Indira Gandhi, who exercised the most extensive censorship since independence, was responsible for a detailed inquiry into broadcast media policy. As the new Minister of Information and Broadcasting in 1964, she introduced 'consultants and specialists and saw to it that their advice was implemented ... major changes ... took place' (Jaykar, 1992: 171). By the time the committee, under Asok Chanda, a former Auditor-General of India, reported in 1966, Indira Gandhi had become prime minister. Couched in the polite language of the bureaucracy, the report was nevertheless a catalogue of missed opportunities

and misplaced efforts. 'A psychological transformation is necessary', it concluded (Chanda Report, 1966: 231), if radio and television were to fulfil their potential in entertaining and informing the people.

The committee made 219 recommendations, including a complete reorganization of AIR, the introduction of advertising and rapid expansion of television, then confined to a tiny experimental station in Delhi (Chanda Report, 1966: 229–49). It concluded that AIR's 'failures arise from organisational deficiencies and inadequate financial resources' and recommended the creation of an autonomous national corporation. It argued that such powerful media as radio and television should remain under public control and 'not be allowed in private hands' (Chanda Report, 1966: 244). The report emphasized the benefits of television 'for the role it can play in social and economic development' and called for a national television service overseen by a corporation separate from radio and insulated from government. It recommended that by the early 1970s all of India should be covered by television (Chanda Report, 1966: 247).

The timing of the report – April 1966 – was inopportune. The Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, had died in January, Mrs Gandhi was an unsteady replacement, the country had just fought its second war in three years and the two-year 'Bihar famine' was beginning. It is not surprising that the report and its recommendations were not instantly embraced. Television expansion did not begin until 1972, roughly when the Chanda Report suggested that the whole country should have achieved television coverage, when, in Bombay, only the second TV station in the country was opened. Pakistan already had a TV system, and strategic Indian stations were started on the borders in Amritsar and Srinagar in 1973. By the second half of 1975, when Mrs Gandhi under her 'emergency', needed to proclaim accomplishments, 'makeshift' stations were opened in Calcutta and Lucknow and a more solidly prepared station in Madras (Chatterji, 1991: 52–3). As one critic, writing just after the 'emergency', observed: 'Mrs Gandhi didn't give it [television] much importance ... until she discovered what a powerful weapon it could be both for offence and defence' (Duggal, 1980: 126). In a celebrated recognition of the possible power of television in the run-up to the post-emergency elections of 1977, Delhi's television station was ordered to screen *Bobby*, the blockbuster film of 1974, in an attempt to minimize the crowd at an opposition rally. The rally still drew hundreds of thousands (*White Paper on Misuse of Mass Media during the Internal Emergency*, 1977: 75–6), and Mrs Gandhi was out of power for the next three years.

The rapid expansion of television, which the Chanda Report advocated in 1966, began only in 1982, catalyzed by the impending Asian Games in New Delhi and the wish of her son, Rajiv Gandhi, newly established as a politician, to demonstrate his own and India's modernity. India's 18 television transmitters in 1979 expanded to 176 by 1985 with 80 percent of the urban population and half of the rural population within range of a TV signal (Luthra, 1986: 489; Page and Crawley, 2001: 56).

This article is not the place to elaborate on the expansion of Indian television, which various studies have analysed (Mitra, 1993; Ninan, 1995; Rajagopal, 2001). It is important to note, however, that bureaucrats and politicians presided over that expansion, and two elements jostled in the process: censorship and advertising. During Indira Gandhi's 'emergency' from June 1975 to March 1977, her government attempted to use All India Radio, and the television service, Doordarshan, which was hived off from AIR in 1976, to promote the virtues of authoritarian rule and the eminence of Mrs Gandhi and her younger son, Sanjay. When she lost office in 1977, the new Janata government produced three inquiries into media – a Press Commission, a *White Paper on Misuse of Mass Media during the Internal Emergency* (1977) and the B.G. Verghese committee into electronic media. The Verghese Committee, following the Chanda recommendations of 1966, called for 'an autonomous national trust' to remove radio and television from the control of government on the lines of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) (*Working Group on Autonomy for Akashvani and Doordarshan*, 1978).

The journey to legislate such a body, which began in 1966, is unfinished in 2006. Once they are securely in power, Indian governments have failed to carry through legislation begun by shakier, more idealistic predecessors. 'No government', a former Director-General of Doordarshan concluded, 'is ever going to let go of the electronic media' (Ghose, 2005: 223). A bill to create an autonomous corporation was introduced in May 1979, just before the fall of the Janata government and the return to power of Mrs Gandhi. She let that bill die. Ten years later another minority government, this time succeeding Rajiv Gandhi and his Congress, passed a similar Prasar Bharati [Indian Broadcasting] Bill (*Frontline*, 1997), but the government fell before it could have the bill proclaimed as law. The new Congress government allowed the bill to lie in limbo, happy to pull the ancient levers of media control. Keep it in 'very cold storage', Prime Minister Narasimha Rao instructed officials in 1994 (Ghose, 2005: 217).

Only with the return of another shaky coalition government in 1997 was the Prasar Bharati Act of 1990 proclaimed by the President (*Frontline*, 1997). But it was a diluted version of the original intentions. The new 'independent' authority has limited funds and 'lives on handouts from government' (Ghose, 2005: 219). Doordarshan and All India Radio remain, in effect, responsible to the Minister of Information and Broadcasting. The cushion between government and broadcaster, the key ingredient of a BBC model, has not been achieved.

The history of advertising and public broadcasting in India may point to future outcomes. The Chanda Report had recommended 'the acceptance of advertising . . . to supplement revenue' but under strict conditions (Chanda Report, 1966: 248). In 1967, Vividh Bharati, the popular channel of All India Radio, was permitted to dedicate 10 percent of air time to adverts (Chatterji, 1991: 58-9). When Doordarshan was created in 1976, its advertisement revenue was Rs 8 million (less than \$200,000). By 1985, in the great television boom, when Doordarshan provided the only television outlets in India, advertising revenues allowed the abolition of licence fees on television and radio (Luthra, 1986: 490). By the mid-1990s, revenue was Rs 4,300 million (close to \$100 million) (*Nitish Sengupta Committee Report*, 1996: para. 2.32). Such revenues enabled Doordarshan to expand its services. For a growing advertising industry, seeking to tap ever deeper into small-town and rural markets, Doordarshan's great attraction was its coverage: by the end of the 1980s, its signal reached more than 80 percent of India. In 2003, it was estimated to cover 90 percent of the country and 75 percent of the population with a network of more than 1100 transmitters and seven different channels (*SSC&B Media Guide India*, 2003: 13).

The arrival of satellite broadcasters, and the rapid commercialization of broadcasting, have, however, undermined the importance of government-controlled television (Page and Crawley, 2001: 72-5). Indeed, Doordarshan's dependence on advertising, and the challenge it faces from outside broadcasters, probably mean that its days as an influential outlet are numbered. But politicians are loath to surrender the apparent influence that goes with an All 'Indira' Radio institution that can be used to blot out or denigrate opponents and tell one's own story in satisfying detail, however tedious such detail might be to others. In 2005, the Congress government looked for ways to control foreign satellite broadcasters, ostensibly to prevent cultural contamination but equally to stem the flow of advertising money towards the satellites and direct it back to Doordarshan (*Outlook*, 2005).

The failures of Indian broadcasting policy

The inability to put the Prasar Bharati Bill into force when it was passed in 1990 marked a significant failure of Indian broadcasting policy. It was perhaps the last time a government initiative could have widely affected not just Indian, but global media production and consumption. In 1990, an Indian version of the BBC, sufficiently removed from government to be able to respond quickly and efficiently to the demands of news and entertainment, could have emerged as an attractive trans-national broadcaster, as *Al-Jazeera* was to do within 10 years (Miles, 2005). India has many advantages: a tradition of media freedom, large numbers of talented English-speaking journalists, an expanding computer and electronics industry, and a vast film industry with 70 years of experience. However, in a structure in which All India Radio and Doordarshan are branches of government, dependent on the whims and pressures of a minister, it has proved impossible to create an imaginative, flexible and fast-moving organization.

By the time the much-tinkered-with Prasar Bharati Act was implemented in 1997, the moment had passed. Satellite television arrived over India with CNN's coverage of the first Gulf War in 1991. The dominance of land-based, controllable-by-government, broadcast media ended for good. In March 1991, 'video magazines', compilations on video cassette of news features and reporting, sent regularly by post to subscribers, were popular because they provided lively reporting, untrammelled by the ponderous sensitivities of Doordarshan (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 14 March 1991: 17; *Hindustan Times*, 3 February 1991: 13). By November 1992, video magazines had almost disappeared and within two years they were gone. Satellite channels had captured the imagination of television owners and owner-aspirants all over India with a minute-by-minute immediacy and all the gimmickry that ratings-seeking television deploys (*Hindu International Edition*, 20 July 1991: 16; *India Today*, 15 November 1992: 26). Two contests began. The first was to see which financial interests could best exploit the new opportunities. The second was over the question of whether government could exercise meaningful control over broadcasters based in other countries who beamed into India from satellites Indians did not own and Indian governments could not regulate.

The old apprehensions that had hobbled All India Radio and Doordarshan remained. But government broadcasters were becoming less relevant as more and more television households connected, through cable operators, to the growing range of channels available

from satellites. What damage would be done to 'Indian culture'? To what extent would uncontrolled broadcasting tear the delicate fabric of national harmony? And, implicit though not stated, how would Ministers get their speeches reported and their pictures on television, if they did not have a direct, authoritative line to the producers?

Satellite channels test markets and attitudes. While Indian governments have few ways to control the channels directly, the channels themselves are sensitive to the 'reactions of the market'. When a talk show on Star-TV maligned Mahatma Gandhi, the host was fired. CNN was apologetic after culturally maladroit depictions of cows (*Hindu International Edition*, 8 July 1995: 16; *India Today*, 31 May 1995: 115). In these instances, 'the people' seemed to be their own censors; government needed to do little. An advertising manager and a producer are likely to be as sensitive to threats from well-resourced pressure groups as a call from the minister.¹⁶ The pressure group and the minister may have different motives, but control of media is the common aim.

Two 'might have beens' suggest themselves. One is domestic, the other international. In India itself, if governments in the formative years had chosen both to invest more money and importance in broadcasting, and if they had created a nimble, non-government (but *public*) broadcaster, social and economic development might have proceeded more rapidly, particularly in north India. Also, widespread acceptance of a national language might have progressed much farther. It is noteworthy that in Kerala on the southwestern coast, where newspaper penetration was highest from the 1950s, social development and improved quality of life were also highest. From the 1920s, Kerala had a recognizable 'public sphere', founded on print, which fostered widespread interest in social reform and political change. The connection between such public action and the necessity for governments to improve the quality of life of their people has been persuasively argued by scholars like Amartya Sen (Dreze and Sen, 1989; Jeffrey, 2001: 186–211). Given the high levels of illiteracy in northern India, a vigorous radio and television culture, generated by an alert, well-funded public broadcaster, might have created the public sphere that seems essential for improved living conditions.

The international 'might have been' – perhaps it is still a 'might be' – is this. An alert, well-funded public broadcaster could have given India a global media presence like the BBC, long before the appearance of Fox, Al-Jazeera or even CNN. The talents existed from the 1950s, as did Indian aspirations to lead the 'non-aligned movement'. But fears about the dangers of electronic media, and the seductive but deceiving

temptations of media control, produced policies in the 1950s that Indian public broadcasting still struggles to modify.

Whether we speak of 'constitutive moments' or 'path dependence' (Starr, 2004: 4–7; Thomas, 2005: 763–83), the patterns set in the first decade of independence proved temptingly easy to follow. British colonial structures, based on fear of political unrest and 'communal strife', provided mechanisms that didactic high-caste Gandhians and superficially cunning politicians were happy to maintain. But in doing so, they rarely achieved their own ends or realized the potential of electronic media. Whether the subversion of government-dominated electronic media, which satellite TV began in the 1990s, leads to a better informed and more prosperous population depends in part on the imaginations and the choices of the private interests that increasingly dominate India's electronic media.

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Notes

- 1 Hopkins notes that the Soviet Union did not exploit radio as effectively as it might, but also points to Lenin's words in 1920 about the 'significant role which radio should play as a powerful means of agitation and propaganda'. I am aware of no similarly strong statement coming from Nehru or his senior colleagues. In the Soviet Union, the ratio of one radio to every three homes was reached only in the 1950s. In the US, this was the level of 1930. Nehru first visited the Soviet Union in 1927 when there were only 90,000 radios in the country (though India then had none) (Hopkins, 1970: 246).
- 2 These were in Hyderabad, Aurangabad, Bombay, Madras, Tiruchchirappalli, Lucknow, Calcutta, Delhi and Peshawar. A station in Baroda opened late in 1939. In the Philippines by 1999, there were more than 500 stations, most of them privately owned. In India in 2004, AIR broadcast from only 208 centres (*Mass Media in India*, 2004, 2005: 47).
- 3 I am grateful to my colleague Angus McIntyre for introducing me to various Indonesian sources.
- 4 This became the Federal Communications Commission in 1934.
- 5 The rush of listeners to Radio Ceylon in the 1950s is part of the folklore of All India Radio (Luthra, 1986: 309; Neuman, 1980: 215).
- 6 Fewer than 14 percent got a daily newspaper (Luthra, 1986: 160).
- 7 Also in 1927 the government of India inquired into the Indian film industry. See Shoesmith (c. 1989).
- 8 This splendid essay gives a vivid account of the Fielden experience.
- 9 The other towns were Lucknow, Aurangabad and Tiruchchirappalli in British India, and Baroda, Hyderabad and Trivandrum in the princely states.

- 10 The stations in Lahore, Peshawar and Dhaka became part of Pakistan's inheritance.
- 11 Patel was Minister of Information and Broadcasting from August 1947 till January 1950.
- 12 Keskar, who represented a constituency in Uttar Pradesh although he was from western India, lost his seat in the general elections of 1962.
- 13 Awasthy may have had his tongue in his cheek in passing on this story, but it catches the mood among those AIR people who saw radio as a tool needing imagination and passion.
- 14 The new station was called Vividh Bharati.
- 15 Masani retired as deputy Director-General of AIR.
- 16 See Starr (2004: 317–26) for the growth of pressure-group censorship of the US film industry in the 1920s and 1930s.

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The predictable responses to the Danish cartoons

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On 30 September 2005 the Danish newspaper *Morgenavisen Jyllands-Posten* published the now famous 12 cartoons of the Holy Prophet Muhammed. For the Danish mass media such obvious provocation on the part of *Jyllands-Posten* (JP) was not really newsworthy. After all JP had published confrontational anti-Islamic pieces many times before. Only when Muslim communities began to react to the offending cartoons and native Danish groups of authors, doctors, dentists, ministers, and others reacted to the tone of the media debate on ethnic minorities, did the mass media begin to cover the cartoon issue and reactions to it. The coverage grew more intense when Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen committed a blunder by refusing to meet with 11 ambassadors representing half a billion Muslim people. Unable to have a dialogue with the Danish government, the ambassadors turned to their governments in the Middle East, while Islamic individuals and groups went to the same countries to talk about the cartoons. One Danish imam phrased it this way: Earlier when we went abroad to talk about anti-Islamic sentiments in Denmark, few people really believed us. With 'the ticking bomb' cartoon, everyone knew exactly what we were talking about and was outraged (Alev, 2005). From here the story turned truly global and released what has been called the most serious crisis in Danish foreign policy since the Second World War.

In the course of events experts of all kinds have joined in to comment on and explain the unfolding global news story. Local reactions were predictable, some said, because the cartoons had simply triggered local outrage and frustration, ignited by social and political tension. The cartoons were not really the problem. Others explained that mass demonstrations and burning of flags were done without protesters having even seen the cartoons. Many words and much ink were wasted on discussing whether the cartoons should have been published or not.