

THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING IN A MULTI-CHANNEL MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

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This paper is an attempt to clarify the possible future role and function of public service broadcasting in an age where a variety of new media technologies is emerging, and the number of channels available to the audience has increased dramatically. It is natural to assume that the role and function of each medium will be affected by such change. Our present task, therefore, is to examine how they will be affected. Many countries in the world now face more or less the same situation. This paper will present a case study of Japan, hoping that this analysis will have enough relevance to the different broadcasting environments in other countries, so that it may be applied to them as well.

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The Emergence of Multi-Channel Service in Japan

Television broadcasting in Japan began in 1953. A public service broadcaster (NHK) started its service in February, and was followed by a commercial broadcaster in August. By the end of 1964, audiences in metropolitan areas had a choice of seven channels: NHK's General Service, NHK's Educational Service, and five privately owned channels. All these services were transmitted through VHF channels. From 1967, UHF channels started up and provided regional service. In summary, before new media technologies had emerged, Japan had two channels served by NHK, five networks run by privately owned broadcasters, and local UHF service in each prefecture. The number of available channels varied from region to region. Today, some remote areas are still served by fewer channels than the metro-

politan areas.

Cable television in Japan started in 1955 as community antenna television. As there are many mountains in the countryside, a technology to improve reception of TV signals was needed. In its initial stage, cable television was used just for this purpose. In the second stage, some of those cable stations started to carry signals from outside the region. This kind of service increased in the remote areas during the 1960s. Then came the third stage of cable television that is usually called multi-channel CATV. According to 1995 statistics, 29 per cent of households in Japan have CATV. Among households with CATV, 6.3 per cent subscribe to multi-channel CATV. Compared to other countries, Japan's CATV penetration rate is not very high. One reason for this may be the high start up cost of CATV. Any new subscriber usually must pay nearly \$ 1,000 for equipment and line hook-up. Another reason may be the number of existing terrestrial channels available. Compared to other countries, the Japanese audience has many terrestrial channels at its disposal. Additional channels provided by CATV may not be as attractive as in countries where there are fewer terrestrial channels available.

NHK started DBS service in 1989 after five years of testing. In 1991, privately owned DBS channels began operation. As of 1995, there were two DBS channels operated by NHK and one channel operated privately. The NHK channels are mainly devoted to news, documentaries and cultural programs while the commercial channel mainly broadcasts entertainment programs. Subscribers of the NHK DBS channels number about 6.6 million (18.6 per cent) and subscribers of the private channel about 1.8 million (5.0 per cent). The monthly fee for DBS is now a very important source of revenue for NHK. It makes up about 13 per cent of their total revenue. The privately owned DBS channel is not bringing in enough revenue from subscription fees to run their operations. They are currently facing very severe financial difficulties.

Broadcasting to the general audience through CS started in 1992. In 1995, there were 11 operators serving audiences. Generous estimates put the number of subscribers at about 300,000 (0.8 per cent), and CS operators are still far away from making a profit.

In general, the multi-channel age has not yet reached Japan. People enjoy additional channels served through CATV, DBS and CS, but each service has technical or economic problems and has not spread rapidly enough to have a foothold in the market yet. However, these two years have seen significant new developments in the field of broadcasting in Japan.

First came the discussion of building an optical fiber cable network in the country. This discussion was stimulated by the idea of a National Information Highway presented in the U.S. NTT, the Japanese telephone and telegraph company, proposed the building of such a network in Japan also, and made a list of the possible uses. The ideas presented by NTT seem unrealistic, and there still exists scepticism toward that idea. The cost of building such a network is estimated at 530 billion dollars, and the time frame for the completion of the network is not clear, although NTT says that 75 per cent of households will be connected by the year 2010. Theoretically, this network will bring Japan into a multi-channel age, but its feasibility is still at question.

A second development is digital satellite broadcasting (DSB). Until recently, this technology has not received much consideration or attention. In 1994, DirecTV started its 155 channel service in the U.S., and by the fall of 1995, the number of subscribers reached 750,000. Seeing the U.S. situation, Japan decided to deregulate the related

