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Sustainable Futures:
Roles & Challenges for Community, Alternative and Citizens' Media in the 21st Century

OM6 Forum: Community Use of Digital Spectrum

Remarks by Nalaka Gunawardene
Science writer and media watcher <alien@nalaka.org>

I'm the odd one out on this panel, as I'm not from Australia -- and don't even live in a country that has set a timeframe for transition from analog to digital spectrum in broadcasting.

Only a few countries in Asia have as yet announced a timeframe for this -- Japan, Korea and Malaysia among them. Some have not even addressed this issue – they are dealing with more basic concerns in broadcast regulation and policy formulation.

All the same, I find this discussion very instructive: sooner or later, all countries will have to go through this transition. It certainly helps to know the issues you are debating and grappling with.

For us in the developing countries – or emerging economies – in Asia, I suggest three actions:
- *Look forward* to the transition from analog to digital spectrum
- *Look sideways* to see how we're currently doing in the analog domain
- *Look back* to reflect on the mistakes we've made along the way (and learn)

Suman Basnet from AMARC Asia Pacific pointed out in an earlier session how the development of community radio across Asia is held back by legal and regulatory bottlenecks. I would add that poor spectrum planning and management are adding to these woes.

I want to make three points.

First point:
Many developing countries in Asia have squandered their analog spectrum, assigning disproportionately large chunks for government and military use. Of the balance, commercial media and telecommunications operators received the lion's share, leaving only a tiny part for use by the public (which must be shared between community radio, amateur radio and public access wireless broadband services). There is no tradition or precedent of rational, fair use of the analog spectrum, and it is worrying that the digital spectrum could inherit these management anomalies. This makes spectrum reforms an urgent priority.

Second point:
A number of emerging economies in Asia have experienced broadcast liberalization in the past 10 to 15 years. However, this has been a patchy, half-hearted kind of liberalization, or what I call 'grudging liberalization'. What happened in many situations was that the duopoly enjoyed by government and military was slightly eased to let in big money corporations -- while keeping out everybody else. We have seen examples of FM frequency auctions in India, and belated attempts to balance the spectrum use between telecom and broadcast users in Indonesia. In South Asia, Nepal allowed community (radio) broadcasting in 1997 and only in recent months did India finally adopt a policy on community broadcasting. Other South Asian countries have licensed commercial FM broadcasters but stubbornly excluded communities and civil society from broadcasting. This poor 'report card' for liberalization does not augur well for a better and fairer management of the digital spectrum.

Third point:
Moving from analog to digital transmission will pose considerable challenges in large, developing countries in Asia – some of which moved from AM to FM radio only a few years ago with considerable effort. Right now TV content production has moved into digital in many of these countries, but the final transmission happens in analog. There's nothing wrong in this ana-digi co-existence, which serves broadcaster and audience needs in resource-starved situations. We should address fundamental reforms in broadcast policy, law and regulation before embarking on the high-cost, tedious and slow process of moving the entire production and distribution process to digital. We who haven't derived and shared the full benefits of analog broadcasting must get our fundamentals right before going digital.

And therein lies the challenge for all of us who want to safeguard media freedom and promote the freedom of expression and cultural production. In my view, many activists in our region are not paying enough attention to how the electro-magnetic spectrum has been mismanaged and abused by various governments. Activist attention has been held by the more tangible, physical threats to media freedom: issues such as censorship, media ownership and political economy of the media.

All these are worthwhile and necessary -- but not sufficient on their own.

The spectrum has been called the 'invisible wealth of nations'. As economic and cultural practices move more and more into the digital realm, we're going to increasingly feel the value of this common property resource. All our gains in the physical world would be undermined if we find the spectrum has been irretrievably allocated to a handful of privileged users ignoring the public interest. We need to wake up to this reality.

Perhaps it's just as well we in developing Asia don't have tight timeframes to switch from analog to digital spectrum use. We've got a good deal of cleaning up and streamlining to do in the analog realm.

This window will be open only for a few years. If we don't act, we run the risk of making an equal mess in the digital spectrum, only far worse.