

The Straits Times

World Focus

Satellite and cable TV catching on fast in Asia

Chaitanya Kalbag

809 words

4 January 1993

Straits Times

English

(c) 1993 Singapore Press Holdings Limited

Some govts feel threatened by foreign encroachment on airwaves

TOKYO - Satellite and cable television is approaching the status of rice as a staple in the Asian diet but some governments feel threatened by foreign encroachment on their airwaves.

Viewers across Asia are tuning in to a cornucopia of information and entertainment.

Millions of Asians now know American newsmen Ted Koppel and Dan Rather. Struggling oriental rock groups jostle for air-time on MTV with Madonna and Ice-T. American soaps outrank Cantonese tearjerkers.

But not everyone is happy about such access to the airwaves.

Several governments in the region have had their tight grip on information rudely broken by "free to air" satellite TV.

Free-to-air is when individuals pick up satellite signals with their own dish, rather than the signals being picked up centrally then distributed by cable or terrestrial means, which means it is harder for the authorities to control what is received.

This was illustrated dramatically last month in India, long fed exclusively by two state-owned channels, when satellite television beamed pictures of savage Hindu-Muslim rioting straight into Indian homes, angering politicians.

Hongkong-based Star TV, which now includes a channel in the Hindi language called Zee TV, reaches an estimated 1.5 million Indian households.

Both Malaysia and Singapore ban private ownership of satellite dishes.

Singapore allows financial companies to have them, while Malaysia restricts them to government ministers and the royalty.

"We need to tread carefully in this area to keep out broadcasts which may purvey values and lifestyles which may be harmful or offensive in our multi-racial and multi-religious society," said a Singapore information ministry spokesman.

Malaysian Information Minister Mohamed Rahmat has likened direct broadcastin g to "clandestine television" and the government recently told hundreds of private owners to take down their dishes or face stiff penalties.

Cable television is officially banned in Taiwan but the island has a flourishing underground industry. About 300 unlicensed cable TV stations, most of them very small, serve about 350,000 of the country's four million households.

Police sporadically raid the illegal stations, snipping wires and confiscating equipment, but operations are soon resumed. Taiwan has three state-influenced channels.

Pakistan's government allowed satellite-dish installation last year for the payment of an annual fee, but conservative Islamic clergymen fear easy access to satellite TV will spread obscenity.

"It is a gateway to obscenity," a spokesman for the Ulema-i-Ahle-Sunnat, an organisation of Sunni religious leaders, said in Karachi.



There is less paranoia in two of Asia's largest Muslim nations.

Bangladesh has only 350 dish antennas in its three major cities but official s estimate the number will cross 1,000 by June this year. State-run television beams six hours daily of the American Cable News Network (CNN).

And Indonesia, with the world's largest Muslim population, has its own state

television and three private TV stations which can be received by viewers across the country by satellite.

Thousands of satellite dishes around the country pick up a variety of foreign programmes.

Last year, Jakarta allowed foreign broadcasters to use its Palapa satellites

for regional beams.

Some Asian governments have realised it is futile to resist this awesome explosion of information.

A state-owned Singapore subscription TV company started a commercial service

in April which offers a 24-hour CNN-based news channel, a movie channel and a Chinese entertainment channel.

In Taiwan, the use of large satellite dishes was legalised in July last year .

Last January, the Cabinet approved a Bill to legalise the cable-television industry and it is expected to go into effect this year after passage by Parliament.

Pakistan's Information Ministry has asked state-run television to improve its programmes to meet what it calls a challenge from the dish antenna.

Meanwhile, richer Asian nations are setting down the markers for a region that is home to nearly three-fifths of humanity and has advertisers salivating over millions of potential customers.

Japan's first wave of satellite broadcasting began in 1989 with two channels

from NHK public television.

At the end of last October, NHK had 4.5 million subscribers. NHK's unscrambled signal needs only a small dish and a spokesman said another 1.9 million non-paying viewers are estimated to watch.

Wowow, the country's first private pay channel, now has 1.1 million subscribers.

Early last month, Australia approved the sale of six licences for microwave pay-television channels, allowing Australians to watch pay television for the first time early this year.

The government plans to sell 10 satellite pay TV channels - four to new media operators, two to the state-run Australian Broadcasting Corporation and four to existing media operators. - Reuter.

Document STIMES0020050604dp1400pty

