

The Arts

**The awesome explosion of Asia's airwaves As viewers tune in to the cornucopia, some governments worry about foreign encroachment**

**CHAITANYA KALBAG**

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SATELLITE and cable television is approaching the status of rice as 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 U.S. newsmen Ted Koppel and Dan Rather more intimately than their local newsreaders. Struggling Oriental rock groups jostle for air-time on MTV with Madonna and Ice-T. U.S. soaps outrank Cantonese tear-jerkers.

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 authorities to control what is received.

This was illustrated dramatically earlier this 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. The action angered politicians.

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

Both Malaysia and Singapore, which tightly oversee the flow of information, 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 broadcasting to a "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. Some 300 unlicensed cable TV stations, most of them very small, serve about 350,000 of Taiwan's 4 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 organization 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 officials estimate the number will cross





1,000 by June 1993. State-run television beams six hours daily of the U.S. 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 programs. Last year Jakarta allowed foreign broadcasters to use its Palapa satellites for regional beams.

Some Asian governments have realized 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. The company, which has about 10,000 subscriptions, aims to increase the number to 100,000 in five years.

In Taiwan, the use of large satellite dishes was legalized in July. Last January the cabinet approved a bill to legalize the cable-television industry and it is expected to go into effect next year after passage by parliament.

Predominantly Muslim Malaysia, which bans nudity, restricts air time allotted to foreign programs and curbs tobacco advertising, recently approved the country's first pay TV and has invited bids to set up a second private television station.

Pakistan's information ministry has asked state-run television to improve its programs 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 October NHK had 4.5 million subscribers. But 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.

In early December Australia approved the sale of six licences for microwave pay television channels, allowing Australians to watch pay television for the first time in early 1993. 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.

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