

# “Murdochisation” of the Media: An Asian Perspective<sup>1</sup>

**Daya Kishan Thussu<sup>2</sup>**  
University of Westminster

**Abstract:** *The Asian mediascape has profoundly changed in the last decade, making major media markets such as in China and India prime targets for transnational media and communications corporations. This article examines key strategies adopted by multimedia conglomerates to strengthen their positions in what may emerge as the world’s largest media market, focusing on one particular company, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, to explore why it has been more successful than others in negotiating its way around the complex Asian media scene. Examining the expansion and consolidation of Star Plus and Star News, Murdoch’s Indian entertainment and information channels, the article argues that their success has been achieved as a result of making programmes in Indian languages, such as Hindi, and by localising content, as well as the astute political approach that News Corporation has adopted in India. In China, Murdoch’s jointly owned Phoenix channel has followed very similar approaches to the emerging television market. This “Murdochisation” of the media – defined as a trend towards market-led entertainment and infotainment – has had an important impact on other media. The article asks: is the growing marketisation of the mass media eroding the public sphere? Or are Murdoch’s media, which may be Western-owned or inspired, but are available in Mandarin and in Hindi, leading to a reinvigorated Asian media scene?*

**Key Words:** *Asia, News Corporation, adaptation, marketisation*

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper presented at the 14th Asian Media and Information Centre (AMIC) annual conference Media and Society in Asia – Transformations and Transitions, held in Beijing, China on July 18-21, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Daya Kishan Thussu is Professor of International Communication at the University of Westminster. He is the Founder and Managing Editor of the new journal Global Media and Communication ([www.sagepub.co.uk/resources/globalmedia.htm](http://www.sagepub.co.uk/resources/globalmedia.htm)). Daya is also the co-author of *Contra-Flow in Global News*; editor of *Electronic Empires - Global Media and Local Resistance* (1998); author of *International Communication - Continuity and Change* (2000), and co-editor of *War and the Media: Reporting Conflict 24/7* (2003).

**Resumo:** *A paisagem midiática da Ásia mudou profundamente na última década, transformando importantes mercados midiáticos, como a China e a Índia, em alvos preferenciais de corporações transnacionais de mídia e comunicação. Este artigo examina estratégias chaves, adotadas por conglomerados multimidiáticos, de fortalecimento de suas posições no que pode emergir como o maior mercado midiático do mundo, focando numa companhia em particular, a News Corporation de Rupert Murdoch, para explorar por que ela tem sido mais bem sucedida do que outras na negociação de sua entrada no complexo cenário midiático da Ásia. Examinando a expansão e consolidação da Star Plus e Star News, os canais indianos de informação e entretenimento de Murdoch, este artigo argumenta que o seu sucesso foi alcançado como resultado da produção de programas em línguas indianas, como o Hindi, e da atribuição de cor local ao conteúdo, assim como da maneira politicamente astuta encarada pela News Corporation na Índia. Na China, o canal de propriedade conjunta Phoenix encarou de maneira similar o mercado emergente de televisão. Esta “Murdochtização” da mídia – definida como uma tendência de direcionamento ao entretenimento e infotainment mercantilizado – teve um impacto importante em outras mídias. O artigo questiona: A crescente mercantilização da mídia de massa está erodindo a esfera pública? Ou a mídia de Murdoch, de propriedade do ocidente, ou inspirada por ele, porém disponível em Mandarim e Hindi, estaria levando a um revigoramento do cenário de mídia Asiático?*

**Palavras-chave:** *Ásia, News Corporation, adaptação, mercantilização.*

The Asian mediascape has profoundly changed in the last decade, making major media markets such as in China and India prime targets for transnational media and communications corporations. This article examines key strategies adopted by multimedia conglomerates to strengthen their positions in what may emerge as the world’s largest media market, focusing on one particular company, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, to explore why it has been more successful than others in negotiating its way around the complex Asian media scene.

Examining the expansion and consolidation of Star Plus and Star News, Murdoch’s Indian entertainment and information channels, the article argues that their success has been achieved as a result of making programmes in Indian languages, such as Hindi, and by localising content, as well as the astute political approach that News

Corporation has adopted in India. In China, Murdoch's jointly owned Phoenix channel has followed very similar approaches to the emerging television market. This 'Murdochisation' of the media - defined as a trend towards market-led entertainment and infotainment - has had an important impact on other media. The article asks - is the growing marketisation of the mass media eroding the public sphere? Or are Murdoch's media, which may be Western-owned or inspired, but are available in Mandarin and in Hindi, leading to a reinvigorated Asian media scene?

### **The Giant Media Bazaar**

Indian media and especially television has experienced profound changes since the early 1990s, accelerated by the combined impact of new communication technologies and the opening up of global markets. The gradual deregulation and privatisation of television transformed the media landscape in a country which had one of the most regulated broadcasting environments among the world's democracies (Price and Verhulst, 1998; Page and Crawley, 2001). The most obvious indication of this change is evident in the exponential growth in the number of television channels and the resultant expansion of mainly Western-based transnational media players into India, one of the world's biggest television markets. At the beginning of the 1990s, there was no television industry worth the name in India, which until 1991 had just one state-controlled channel, *Doordarshan*, little more than a mouthpiece of the government of the day and notoriously monotonous. By 2005, more than 200 digital channels were operating. This expansion demanded new programme content - from news to game-and-chat shows, from soap operas to 'reality TV' - which have been provided by a burgeoning television industry that is increasingly going global (Indian television is now available in five continents). The process of rapid expansion and globalisation as a result of market liberalisation is also evident in the availability and growth of Indian television channels catering to a large Indian, and indeed South Asian, diaspora, estimated to be 24 million strong.

### **Is there a 'Murdoch Effect?'**

The opening up of the Indian media sphere to the outside world has had profound implications for the democratic process within India. Aware of India's economic potential,

transnational media and communications corporations have adopted an array of strategies to strengthen their positions in what may emerge as one of the world's largest media markets (Butcher, 2003). This complex market has been consistently targeted and tamed by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation (one of the world's biggest media and communications conglomerates – 2004 revenue: \$20.96 billion).

Murdoch's media can justifiably claim to have pioneered satellite television in Asia when in 1991 it launched five television channels, reaching a pan-Asian audience (see Table 1). By 2005, Star (Satellite Television Asian Region) was broadcasting according to its website 'over 50 television services in seven languages to more than 300 million viewers across 53 Asian countries'. It claimed to have a daily viewership of some 100 million and control over 20,000 hours of Indian and Chinese programming and also owning the world's largest contemporary Chinese film library, with more than 600 titles.

India's rapidly expanding economy and a pro-market government, coupled with an established satellite network, made the Indian market an attractive proposition for Murdoch. Combined with this was the huge number of potential consumers - a large, growing and increasingly Westernised middle class, variously estimated to be between 200 to 250 million, providing global media corporations with unrivalled opportunities for running a wide array of satellite channels. Cable and satellite television have increased substantially since 1992, when only 1.2 million Indian homes had cable and satellite television. According to the trade press, in 2005 there were nearly 400 million television viewers in India, with cable and satellite penetration reaching more than 60 million homes and growing annually at the rate of 10 per cent (*Satellite and Cable TV*, July 2005). The Indian media business is one of the fastest growing industries in India, estimated to be worth \$5 billion (Kohli, 2003).

Star TV was the first major global player to recognize the demand for Western, mainly American, programming for an Indian audience growing up on the dull and drab output of *Doordarshan*, when, in 1991, it started beaming a five-channel satellite service in English. This became an instant hit with the English-fluent urban elite. However, Star soon realized that to make a profit the channel would have to make programmes in a language

that a majority of Indians understood and on themes with which the masses would be able to identify (Thussu, 1998). Having been in the Indian market for over ten years, Star's fortunes in India changed dramatically after its flagship channel Star Plus launched *Kann Banega Crorepati*, an Indian version of the successful British game show *Who Wants To Be a Millionaire?*, hosted by India's best-known film star Amitabh Bachchan. The series helped Star become the most popular private channel in the country – with an average of 40 out of the top 50 shows every week. In 2005, Star claimed to be broadcasting its programmes to more than 31 million homes in India. However, given the international nature of Star TV, these programmes were reaching a large trans-Indian and even a trans-Asian audience.

---

#### A Star in Asia

---

Entertainment	Sports	Movies	Music	News
Star Plus	ESPN	Star Chinese Movies Channel [V]		Star News
Xing Kong	Star Sports	Star Movies		Phoenix InfoNews Star
Chinese Channel				Star News Asia
Star Gold				Star Ananda
Star One				
Star Utsav				
Star World				
Vijay				
Phoenix Chinese				

---

While they started out with mainly Western programmes, global players such as News Corporation have been forced first to Indianize, then regionalize and finally localise (the examples of Vijay TV in Tamil and Star Ananda, 24-hour Bengali news service are indicative of this trend) their programming to suite the range and variety of cultural and linguistic tastes encompassing the Indian market. Entertainment-led channels dominate the cable and satellite market, and despite the proliferation of cable and satellite channels, the top three positions are held by Sony Entertainment Television, Star Plus and Zee TV – the first two belonging to major global players and the last one – India's largest multimedia company, is in partnership with AOL-Time Warner.

One indication of the transnationalization of Star Plus is the increasing use of English subtitles in its programmes, to meet the demands of increasing subscribers abroad. Another is the mixing of English and Hindi in an evolving hybrid language of Hinglish. The deployment of Hinglish on Star's all-music channel Channel V contributed to its popularization, particularly among the youth – a trend which in subsequent years seems to have influenced much of Indian television. The idea behind using a mixture of Hindi and English was to expand the channel's reach beyond the Hindi-speaking regions of India and, crucially, to cater to the South Asian diaspora - part of an ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse group - which would be more amenable to a hybrid variety of television and demonstrate greater empathy with hybridised languages.

Star made much of this localisation – in a full page advertisement it extolled – '*Aapki boli - aapka Plus Point*' (Your own language is your Plus point). It is instructive to see how Star Plus marketed itself for what it saw as a very *desi* (native) constituency. All the programming was Indian, most in Hindi (some in English and Hinglish) and on Indian themes. This change of strategy on the part of Star, emphasising the foreign-owned channel's national credentials - reflects growing realisation that localisation is a key part of globalisation of television culture.

Similar trends can be seen in China, where Murdoch has been operating since 1996 the Phoenix Chinese Channel which has now developed into a major international multi-channel broadcaster reaching the Chinese communities in Asia Pacific, Europe and North America: Phoenix Chinese Channel, Phoenix Movies Channel, Phoenix InfoNews Channel, Phoenix CNE and Phoenix North American Channel, available on the largest DTH satellite-broadcasting platform in the United States, DirecTV, also now part of Murdoch's media empire.

Phoenix Infonews Channel, the first 24-hour Mandarin-language foreign satellite television channel, is available in Hong Kong, Philippines, Thailand, Mainland China and Singapore, drawing on resources of Fox News and Sky News. In addition, Murdoch's media is also visible in mainland China in the form of Xing Kong, the entertainment channel launched in China in 2002, while Phoenix Movies Channel broadcasts more than

80 per cent Asian films, as well as covering stories about movies and celebrities. In addition, for the past three years, Channel [V] has collaborated with China Central Television (CCTV) and Shanghai Media Group (China's first private media company) to present The Channel [V] Chinese Music Awards.

### **“Murdochisation” of the media?**

This localisation – sometimes in the form of highly complex hybridisation of genres and languages – is not a uniquely Indian phenomenon (Banerjee, 2002). However, what makes the Indian case interesting is the way globalisation has impacted on and transformed television news. A corollary of this is how the new broadcasting news-scape affects the public sphere in a complex democratic polity (Sen, 2005). Is the entry and consolidation of the global media players helping or hindering the public sphere? (Sparks, 1998).

Though most viewers choose Star for its entertainment programmes, there is also an increasing audience for its news output. Star News (the 24-hours news now entirely in Hindi), a joint venture between *Anand Bazaar Patrika* (a Calcutta-based major Indian media company) and Star TV, claims to have a viewership of 20 million Indian homes. It is also available in Europe, United States, Australia, Middle East, South-East Asia and Central Asia. In addition, Murdoch's news networks in Asia includes an English language pan-Asian Star News Asia, based in Hong Kong which since 2000 has been operating a 30-minute daily news broadcast 'tailored for the decision makers of the Asian region' and available on Star World which reaches 17 million viewers in 29 countries across Asia. For international news, Star News as well as Star News Asia draw on material from Fox News Channel, from New York and Washington and Sky News from London.

### **The battle of news networks**

As elsewhere in Asia, CNN's coverage of the 1991 *Operation Desert Storm* brought the idea of 24/7 news to India. It was Murdoch's Star News that made the concept of rolling news a reality in India when it launched an English-language news channel in 1998 to coincide with the national elections that year. Though it had the Star platform, the news

was not in fact produced in-house. New Delhi Television (NDTV) provided all the news material – both in Hindi and English in what was a mutually beneficial partnership: NDTV, a relatively small though highly-respected media organisation set up by a former Professor of Economics at the University of Delhi, could reach the homes of affluent Indians through the Star platform, while Star could benefit from the gravitas of a serious news channel – arguably India’s best television news network. As interest in news grew, other channels including Zee Network followed suit. Unlike Star, Zee News aimed at a mass audience and therefore launched a dedicated Hindi language news channel, the first of its kind. Its main rival *Aaj Tak*, part of the India Today group, publisher of India’s best known news magazine *India Today*, launched a 24-hour Hindi news channel in 2000 and within less than a year came to dominate the news market and by 2005 was claiming to reach 30 million homes.

By the time the Star-NDTV contract came to an end in 2003, NDTV had grown financially strong enough to have the confidence to go it alone, launching two channels, the English-language, NDTV 24/7 and NDTV India, in Hindi. To compete in the English-language news market, India Today group launched *Headlines Today* – a fast-paced, youthful news network, with its motto of ‘sharp news for sharp people’ (Unnikrishnan, 2003). After splitting from NDTV, Murdoch’s news operation decided to produce news in-house. In this new stage of its indigenisation, Star News transformed itself into a Hindi-only channel, to widen its appeal among the audiences for the language spoken by the largest numbers of Indians. The Hindi news market is already crowded - apart from Zee News and *Aaj Tak*, Star News also faces strong competition from *Sahara Samay*, part of the powerful Sahara Group which apart from owning a major airline also runs India’s largest selling Hindi newspaper, *Rashtriya Sahara*.

As the news networks have proliferated, the audience is fragmenting and inevitably leading to a sharpened competition among news channels. One outcome of this increasingly escalating ratings battles is that the news networks are progressively tending towards infotainment – happily mixing information and entertainment and focusing on human-interest stories, especially about film stars, cricketers and other celebrities. In this new television news culture, it seems, the emphasis is not always on the journalistic skills of

news anchors and reporters but on how they look on camera, style taking precedence over substance. A majority of broadcast journalists represent a shift in age profile – youthful, energetic and telegenic individuals being privileged over experience and gravitas. This trend, visible elsewhere in Asia too, demonstrates a shift from a serious to a more popular news agenda, driven by the logic of maximizing profit, which is at the heart of a market-led media environment championed by the likes of Rupert Murdoch.

Apart from setting the agenda for such a media ecology, multi-media moguls like Murdoch can also wield enormous political influence through their extensive control of both information software (programme content) and hardware (delivery systems). The Murdoch media empire straddles the globe, with wide-ranging media interests - from newspapers (110 newspapers, including *The Times*, London; and 9 magazines); film (Fox filmed Entertainment and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox); broadcast and satellite and cable TV (Fox Broadcasting – 35 stations in the US, STAR TV); publishing (HarperCollins); satellites (DirecTV); to the Internet. This makes News Corporation one of the world's truly global media empires, created, built and dominated by one man - Rupert Murdoch, the septuagenarian chairman and Chief Executive Officer of News Corporation (Page, 2003).

Murdoch's political leanings are well known – that a conservative political agenda characterises his media is acknowledged even by his editors. His conservatism is often tinged with a very pragmatic political attitude. In Britain, for example, Murdoch has consistently used his newspapers - *The Times* (the country's oldest daily newspaper) and *The Sun* (Britain's largest selling popular newspaper) - to champion the political leadership which favours a liberal media environment, for example, privatisation of broadcasting. His newspapers were crucial in the victory of the Labour Party in 1997, when he switched sides from the Tories to Labour by explicitly supporting Tony Blair. In the US, Murdoch's media has been an enthusiastic supporter of the Republican cause, including the deregulation of broadcasting (Page, 2003). These political attitudes are also reflected in the way Murdoch's networks such as Fox News, which has overtaken CNN as the key cable news channel in the US, cover international conflicts such as continuing war in Iraq, which virtually all Murdoch media support (Greenslade, 2003). Supplementing Fox News are the

London-based Sky News, part of British Sky Broadcasting one of the most profitable broadcasters in Europe, and Star News Asia, beamed daily from Hong Kong.

During the ‘war,’ Fox News, which ignoring its motto: ‘Real Journalism, Fair and Balanced,’ became the loud mouthpiece of the round-the-clock operational Office of Global Communications in the White House. Fox’s unrelenting and literally flag-waving patriotism (with the US flag fluttering in the corner of the screens) and the description from its ‘embedded’ reporters of US war machine as ‘heroes’ and ‘liberators,’ met with triumph in the ratings war. Even before the bombs started falling on Baghdad, one of the main presenters on Fox News, Bill O’ Reilly, dismissed even mild scepticism about the desirability of military action or any disagreement on military tactics, telling viewers that the US should go in and ‘splatter’ the Iraqis. In this gung-ho approach, the network appeared to present the ‘war’ as a spectacle. Often military action was couched in the language of a war of liberation, and sometimes presented in the form of an entertainment show, drawing on visual techniques borrowed from Hollywood. The rescue of Private Jessica Lynch, who became an icon of the conflict, provided an example of mixing entertainment and information, no doubt influenced by the Hollywood film *Saving Private Ryan*. It is now known that Lynch’s courageous ‘rescue’ by US Special Forces from Iraqi captors, was in fact a morale-boosting event staged for television cameras. Murdoch’s news networks appeared to be willingly part of the operation’s news management, which included arranging for embedded television journalists to report the progress of the invasion, from the perspective of Pentagon. Unfounded allegations were bandied about on news channels such as Fox to justify the invasion: that Iraq was linked to the 9/11 attacks; that it possessed vast ‘weapons of mass destruction’ and was ready and willing to use them.

In addition, Fox News amply demonstrated an unambiguous dislike for any dissent. When Michael Wolff, a regular contributor for *New York* magazine broke ranks at the daily press conference at the million-dollar press centre in Doha in Qatar, arguing that he was not covering the war but ‘the news conference about the war,’ Fox News attacked him for his lack of patriotism, and one of its regular commentators, Rush Limbaugh, gave out Wolff’s email address on air – in one day alone, according to Wolff, he received 3,000 hate emails (Wolff, 2003).

## “Foxification” of TV News?

If jingoism and blatant political partisanship can work in the US, why not elsewhere? After all, newspapers and magazines have definite editorial slants and dedicated readerships precisely because of this reason. Why should broadcasters not be free to project certain viewpoints? However, in the UK, Murdoch’s Sky News has to operate within the remit of ‘due impartiality’, proposed by the government-appointed, though autonomous, Independent Television Commission, making it difficult for Sky News to openly pursue a political position. Given the cultural influence of the BBC and the public-service broadcasting ethos, Sky News has tended to follow the standards set by BBC news journalism. However, Sky is under constant pressure from its owner, to treat news from conflict zones as drama and as an event.

Will Fox News’s success lead to the so-called ‘Foxification’ of television news in other parts of the world? Already other Murdoch networks, particularly in Asia, regularly use news reports and footage from Fox News. During the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, one could detect the beginnings of the Foxification of news on Murdoch’s news operations in India. In its spruced up, youthful and flashier incarnation launched in the middle of *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, Star News routinely broadcast live footage from Fox News and reproduced, often verbatim, though in Hindi translation, the standard Pentagon line on the progress of the ‘war’.

There can be other, more insidious, affects of Foxification. The manner in which stories are chosen and framed on Star News by the channel’s youthful team of anchors and reporters from its 21 bureaux across the country, tend to follow a flashier news agenda that emphasizes metropolitan news. As if symbolising the change in editorial focus of the news network, the Star News headquarters was shifted to India’s commercial capital and heart of its film factories – Mumbai. In an intensive orientation session organised by Sky TV, the emphasis was on style and presentation rather than on substance, with journalists being asked to follow Murdoch’s global credo ‘no hair on the face’ for those who appear on camera (Barman *et al*, 2003).

The programme content also reflected an urban bias. For example, its daily *City 60* programme focuses exclusively on news events in India's major cities. The news channel seems to be obsessed with glamour, crime and celebrity culture. This tabloidization is particularly evident in such programmes as *Red Alert* and *Sansani* (Sensation), shown every weekday.

To popularise this new version of news, Star spent a huge amount on PR to promote the Indianisation of the news network, with a multi-million rupee advertising campaign, including Bollywood style songs eulogising the primacy of truth and fairness in reporting in 'your own language' and with the catch-line '*apko rakhe aage*' (keeps you (the audience) in the forefront). The move to Hindi may have been engineered by market logic as shown by the fact that within one week of this switch Star News ratings almost doubled.

Star News seemed to create as well as revel in the preponderance of 'commodity images' in the media (Mazzarella, 2003). This commodification of news is reflected also among some of India's most revered national newspapers such as *The Times of India*, which now regularly publishes Bollywood gossip and stories concerning sex and scandals, especially involving celebrities (Sonwalkar, 2002). That such an emphasis may not be appropriate for audiences in a poor country, afflicted with serious socio-economic problems does not appear to affect commodified journalism. As one commentator noted: 'The best figure I could come up with for 'national' media journalists covering the rural crisis through one full week was six. Those covering the Lakme India Fashion Week for a full seven days? Over 400 (accredited plus daily pass holders). Between them, they produced in one count, some 400,000 words in print. Also, over 1,000 minutes in TV coverage. Some 800 hours of TV/video footage were shot. And close to 10,000 rolls of film exposed. India does not get much shinier than that. Consider that this was the main media event in a country where less than 0.2 per cent of the population sports designer clothes. Where per capita consumption of textiles in 2002 at 19 metres was way below the world average. And this was a fashion show which drew more journalists than buyers' (Sainath, 2004a).

These trends indicate the Murdoch effect in the realm of news and current affairs television, which tends to demonstrate a shift from a serious to a more popular news agenda, driven by the logic of maximizing profit. As television increasingly defines how public opinion is shaped, especially in a country where 40 per cent of the population cannot read or write, such trends can be worrisome. I have characterized this 'Murdochisation' of media as 'the process which involves the shift of media power from the public to privately owned, transnational, multimedia corporations controlling both delivery systems and the content of global information networks' (Thussu, 1998a: 7). The process of 'Murdochisation' is a combination of the following factors: a convergence of global media technologies; a tendency towards a market-driven journalism thriving on circulation and ratings wars; transnationalisation of US-inspired media formats, products and discourse; and lastly, an emphasis on infotainment, undermining the role of the media for public information' (ibid). Eight years on, the private media power is much more pronounced, as the marketisation of mass media becomes a global reality.

### **Privatization of the Public Sphere?**

Where does this type of commercialism leave public media? Who defines and looks after the public interest? Despite severe competition from networks such as Star, the state broadcaster continues to dominate the airwaves. The main national channel of *Doordarshan*, DD1, reaches about 400 million viewers, making it the most widely watched network in the world, second only to China's state broadcaster CCTV. Though *Doordarshan* receives substantial support from the government, which has extended its reach and added new channels (in 2005, it had 25 channels), it is increasingly under pressure to provide entertainment as well as education (*Doordarshan* website).

Keeping its promise of holding up to the public-service ethos, in 2000 *Doordarshan* launched a 24-hour educational channel *DD-Gyandarshan*, which is now accessible to an estimated 20 million viewers all over India. This was followed two years later with the inauguration of *DD-Bharati*, a dedicated cultural channel, though it has not been funded sufficiently well – in 2003, for example, *DD Bharati* received only 140 million rupees out of annual budget of 20 billion rupees of *Prasar Bharati*, the semi-autonomous body which

governs *Doordarshan*. (Gopalakrishnan, 2004). More money is going towards entertainment-oriented programming as well as for coverage of live sporting events. Like public-service broadcasters elsewhere, *Doordarshan* is constantly losing audience to private networks.

News on *Doordarshan* has yet to acquire the level of professionalism that educated audiences associate with an NDTV news bulletin. Part of the problem appears to be that DD News is perceived to be reflecting the official position, despite promises by successive governments to give autonomy to the electronic media. What has changed, however, is its revenue-generating structure, as *Doordarshan* has rapidly commercialised, a process intensified by the increasingly neo-liberal governments of the 1980s and 1990s. As a result, *Doordarshan* has become much more entertainment oriented: its soaps - originally borrowing from the success of *telenovelas*, in Brazil and Mexico, using education entertainers - a mix of education, information and entertainment – have been altered to meet the needs of advertisers.

One result of such competition is the ideological shift in television culture from public-service to profit-oriented programming. The growing commodification of information and the trend towards corporatised news can adversely affect the public-service role of television, whose egalitarian potential remains hugely underexplored in India (Thussu, 1998b). Television news can be of crucial importance in a democratic polity. The way the 2004 parliamentary election was covered by private television networks is indicative of the problems associated with a market-led media system. During election campaigning, news channels vied with each other to give airtime to film stars campaigning for major political parties – with focus on their personalities, antics and popular rhetoric. Many film stars also contested the elections, giving journalists ample ammunition to spice up their reports, with quotes and misquotes from the matinee idols in a country where films are an integral part of popular culture.

Moreover, the private television networks appeared keen to promote their pro-market views. The increasing importance shown to the coverage of corporate world, of stock-market and exchange rates, reached feverish pitch during the election coverage. What one commentator called ‘McMedia’ had its priorities clearly marked out. ‘In three days, the

big media gave the ‘suffering’ in the stock market more space than they had to thousands of farmers’ suicides in the past few years. Never mind that two-thirds of our people depend on agriculture. Or that just 1.15 per cent of India’s 180 million households invest in stocks’ (Sainath, 2004b). In this neo-liberal age, access to financial news is undoubtedly important but most Indian news networks tend to give disproportionate amount of airtime to express corporate views. This may reflect the growing privatisation of the media and its dependence on corporate sources. ‘When I started out in the 1970s’, wrote Sevanti Ninan, one of India’s most respected journalists and a keen observer of the media scene, ‘news editors frowned if you so much as mentioned a company by name in news copy. A press release by a company was somehow a pariah in a way that press releases on inferior paper by the local municipal corporation or police headquarters were not. Public was more worthy of news space than private. And politics more worthy than business, governance more than entertainment’ (Ninan, 2003).

The increasing marketisation of television seems to have left out of the picture the majority of India’s citizens, the poor, especially those living in the countryside. It is ironic that the country that pioneered the use of space technology for education, with the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) of 1975-76, which brought TV to the poorest villages in the most inaccessible areas, has ignored the educational potential of television.

As debates about cultural and media imperialism have ebbed, globalisation is increasingly seen as a harbinger of modernity and thus a potentially liberating phenomenon. Globalisation has given a fillip to Indian entrepreneurs and Murdoch has shown great skills to use it to promote his media interests in India. There is an increasing tendency for joint ventures – in print, radio and of course television. The most significant of these is between Star and Tata (India’s largest industrial house) on Direct-to-Home (DTH) television, to be called T-Sky, a pan-Indian state-of-the-art digital infrastructure for pay television.

There is little doubt that market-led broadcasting has created a more open and wider public sphere in India. Is it not a positive development that a majority of Indians are watching their television news, produced by Indian companies on Indian themes in their

own languages to higher professional and technical standards than was possible under the monopoly of state broadcaster? Given the types of news programming broadcast on networks such as Star, one can be forgiven for assuming that this is an Indian-owned national television network and has no connection with an Australian-born US citizen, who ultimately owns it.

It has been argued that popularising news and current affairs may in fact have a liberatory potential and a more democratic character (Hartley, 1996; Langer, 1998; Sparks and Tulloch, 2000; Delli Carpini and Williams, 2001). However, this could appear to be an endorsement of popular journalism in a market-driven media environment that is increasingly threatening the quality of public debate in a developing polity. The pro-market orientation of Murdoch's channels is clear. That the news is in Hindi and on Indian themes may give an authentic feel and native character to broadcasting and therefore provide a more acceptable face of globalisation but the reality is that Murdoch's channels unashamedly promote the values of global capitalism, with the US at its core. A survey by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, released in June 2005 found that US image is strongest in India, where 71 per cent of Indians express a positive opinion of the United States, compared with 54 per cent three years ago (Pew Center, 2005).

Such networks may give a sense of broadening the public sphere but in fact they may be narrowing and shrinking the parameters of debate in ideological terms (Rajan, 2005). This attitude is evident in the fact that the rural poor are remarkably absent not only from news stories but also from dramas and serials, and not just on Murdoch's channels. A socially relevant television agenda does not fit well with the competitive broadcasting environment within which Murdoch's television networks operate, being primarily interested in the demographically desirable, urban middle class or the famed NRIs (non-resident Indians, part of the huge Indian diaspora), with the disposable income to purchase the goods advertised on these channels.

Despite their avowedly Indian identity, networks such as Star are arguably clones of the US model of market-led television, susceptible to the same kind of commercial pressures that Robert McChesney has so comprehensively articulated in the case of the US

(McChesney, 1999 and 2004). In India, as television is likely to be further driven by the ratings wars and advertisers' demand for consumers, the Murdochisation of the media is set to firm up its grip.

Given that visuals can be a powerful instrument for propagating dominant ideology, especially in a country where nearly 400 million people are illiterate, television can play a critical role in the creation of a marketplace in which the transnational corporate clients can consolidate and expand. The Murdoch effect is likely to outlive the media baron whose name it bears.

## References:

- Banerjee, Indrajit (2002) The locals strike back? media globalization and localization in the new Asian television landscape, *Gazette*, 64 (6): 517-536.
- Barman, A.; Bhatia, G. and Annuncio, C. (2003) Reality bites with images, *Outlook*, February 17.
- Delli Carpini, Michael and Williams, Bruce (2001) 'Let us Infotain You: Politics in the New Media Environment,' in Lance Bennett and Robert Entman (eds.) *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*. Cambridge University Press: 160-181
- Doordarshan website (2005) <http://www.ddindia.net>
- Gopalakrishnan, A.(2004) Doordarshan's dilemma, *Frontline*, 21(13), June 19-July 2.
- Greenslade, Roy (2003) Their Master's Voice, *The Guardian (Media)*, 17 February, pp. 1-3.
- Hartley, John (1996) *Popular Reality: Journalism, Modernity and Popular Culture*, Routledge.
- Kohli, Vinita (2003) *The Indian Media Business*, Sage.
- Langer, John (1996) *Tabloid Television: Popular Journalism and the 'Other news'*, Routledge.
- McChesney, Robert (1999) *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*, University of Illinois Press.
- McChesney, Robert (2004) *The Problem of the Media – U.S. Communication Politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Monthly Review Press.
- Ninan, Sevanti (2003) Changing journalism, *The Hindu*, 2 March.
- Page, Bruce (2003) *The Murdoch Archipelago*, Simon & Schuster.

- Page, David and William Crawley (2001) *Satellites Over South Asia: Broadcasting, Culture and the Public Interest*, Sage.
- Pew Center (2005) *US Image Up Slightly, But Still Negative: American Character Gets Mixed Reviews*, Pew Global Attitudes Project, Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, Washington, 23 June 2005. Available: <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=247>
- Price, Monroe and Stefaan Verhulst (eds.) (1998) *Broadcasting Reform in India: A Case Study in the Uses of Comparative Media Law*, Oxford University Press.
- Rajan, Nalini (ed.) (2005) *Practising Journalism: Values, Constraints, Implications* New Delhi: Sage.
- Sainath, P. (2004a) The feel good factory, *Frontline*, 21(5), February 28-March 12.
- Sainath, P. (2004b) McMedia & market *jihad*, *The Hindu*, 2 June.
- Sparks, Colin (1998) Is there a global public sphere? in Thussu, D. K. (ed.) *Electronic Empires - Global Media and Local Resistance*, Arnold.
- Sparks, Colin and Tulloch, John (eds.) (2000) *Tabloid Tales - Global Debates Over Media Standards*. Rowman and Littlefield.
- Sen, Amartya (2005) *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*, London: Allen Lane.
- Star website (2005) [www.startv.com](http://www.startv.com)
- Thussu, Daya Kishan (1998a) (ed.) 'Introduction' in *Electronic Empires- Global Media and Local Resistance*, Arnold.
- Thussu, Daya Kishan (1998b) 'Localizing the Global: Zee TV in India', in Daya Thussu (ed.) *Electronic Empires- Global Media and Local Resistance*, Arnold, pp. 273-94
- Thussu, Daya Kishan (2000) *International Communication: Continuity and Change*, Arnold.
- Unnikrishnan, C. (2003) Glamourisation of news, *Screen*, 18 April.
- Wells, Matt (2003) BBC chief warns over Murdoch dominance, *The Guardian*, 25 August, p. 1.
- Wolff, Michael (2003) 'You know less than when you arrived,' *The Guardian* (Media), 31 March, pp. 1-3.