



“Public Service Broadcasting; the Maldives Experience”

Speech Delivered by

Mohamed Shahyb

Vice President

Maldives Broadcasting Commission

**SEMINAR ON 'RE-FOCUSING PUBLIC SERVICE
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Delegates to the seminar on 'Re-focusing Public Service Broadcasting in South Asia',

Distinguished Members of the Asia Media Information and Communication Centre AMIC,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Assalam Alaikum.

I would like to thank AMIC for the opportunity extended to Mr. Badru Naseer, who was recently elected President of the newly instituted Maldives Broadcasting Commission and who is regarded as a veteran of broadcasting in the Maldives, to share a few thoughts on his wealth of experience as a broadcaster.

Unfortunately for him, he could not make it to the seminar, which is fortunate for me since it gave me the opportunity to be here in this esteemed gathering. I'm honored to represent him.

I convey my sincere gratitude to the organizers of this event, AMIC, for the warm hospitality extended to me and other delegates to the conference. Your warmth and generosity has made my visit a truly memorable experience.

I'm delighted to be in Hyderabad, which is fast becoming a major media and communication centre in India. India herself with her confluence of many cultures, religions, languages and dialects is such a colorful kaleidoscope of human diversity; one cannot help but marvel at the splendor and dynamism of the country.

I understand this seminar is being held alongside AMIC's 20th Annual Conference, which in turn is taking place in the wake of AMIC's 40th anniversary celebrations this year.

I would like to express my profound appreciation to AMIC for providing four decades of outstanding service in the global development of media and communication and giving a strong platform for all stakeholders ranging from academics, media industry professionals, government agencies, policymakers, regulators, donors, UN agencies and civil society organizations to contribute towards the development of the media.

Distinguished delegates,

The history of broadcasting in the Maldives began 48 years ago on 29 December 1962, with a radio service. The next significant development came sixteen years later, with television services which began on 29 March 1978 with the establishment of Television Maldives. These two services became the primary sources of information, education and entertainment of the Maldivian people.

Close to half a century later, one fact remains undisputed; that Maldives has consistently provided Public Service Broadcasting as its main content for over 33 years.

However on 22 December 2008 the management of Television Maldives, (TVM) the national TV and Voice of Maldives (VOM) the national radio, was handed over to the newly formed state company, Maldives National Broadcasting Corporation (MNBC).

Following this, Television Maldives was re-branded as "MNBC ONE" and Voice of Maldives as "RAAJJE RADIO". The effective public service role played by the two national broadcasters, which were on the verge of being transformed into full-fledged public service broadcasters under law, became severely restricted.

In 2009 the government stopped allocating budget to run these stations creating a heavy dependence on advertising revenue which as we all know impairs editorial independence. The national radio and TV,

now compete with private broadcasters, the internet media and the print media in order to secure advertisements.

The fate of these two stations MNBC ONE and RAAJJE RADIO now hangs in the balance in a political deadlock over the transfer of these broadcasting assets to the autonomous and independent Maldives Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) created by law. Public service broadcasting in Maldives is currently in existence in name only.

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

The Maldives is a small island nation of over one thousand one hundred coral islands, situated in the Indian Ocean, west of Sri Lanka.

In the early years of the 1980's the dispersed geography of the country placed limitations on transportation, which proved to be quite a challenge for the staff of the radio station in their efforts to gather information from the islands and air content of relevance to the people with a view to increase public participation in programs.

To address this problem VOM which lacked adequate funds to travel to the islands, employed a strategy of making requests to government authorities and NGO's whereby an opportunity to travel was given to one producer from the station on their official trips to the atolls, enabling program makers to cover stories from island communities.

During this time, producers of the station made several trips to the atolls giving voice to the people, producing programs to suit their needs and consequently bringing the island communities closer together. The station had to bear just the cost of food and accommodation of the travelling producer, while the library of the station accumulated local content from the islands.

Furthermore, these trips provided opportunities and avenues to build ties with the locals from the islands paving the way for people's participation in the programs.

The national radio, VOM played a vital role in sustaining the fragile economy and environment of the country by keeping together the 200 islands with a dispersed population of less than two hundred thousand people and by catering to the development needs of the communities.

Even though VOM reached all inhabited corners of the country, till 2006 the Television Maldives's coverage area did not extend to the entire country. In the 1990's telephone services were available only in the Male' area and print media did not make its circulation to the dispersed islands.

It was radio communication and the services of VOM which bridged the island communities, while keeping them informed educated and entertained during those years. It was Voice of Maldives, which acted as the sole link between the people and their government, which propagated nation building and provided itself as a vital tool for national development.

It is hardly surprising that during those times, radio service was regarded and valued in par with food, water and shelter.

Clearly, the international community acknowledged this fact; aid provided at the time primarily included food, medication and radio receivers.

Distinguished delegates,

Maldives began a process of modernization in 1975 with monumental strides in every sphere of development.

The national TV and radio contributed significantly to the rapid pace of modernization and development, the people of the Maldives have enjoyed since then. I'd like to note here that during the period of 1975 to 2008, the national radio and TV dedicated over 90 percent and at times 100 percent of their on-air for public service broadcasts.

By 1979 the literacy rate of the adult population of the country was less than 30 percent. Thus began a nationwide Literacy Program, which sought to create an educated citizenry through achieving universal literacy for adults with a view that no meaningful development can take place without informed participation of the masses who were seen as the agents of the process of change.

A dearth in educational institutions and teachers meant that the national radio had to assume the role of the teacher in the adult literacy program for years, with special programs broadcast for this purpose every day. In a bid to create nationwide cooperation and a euphoric atmosphere to the campaign to wipe out illiteracy, theme songs, slogans and words of encouragement were broadcast extensively on radio.

When the campaign successfully attained 98 percent literacy rate, national TV and radio were cast in the role of a teacher for primary

and secondary students within the curricula of formal education. Correspondingly radio broadcast teacher education programs every week to cater to the acute shortage of teachers in the country.

Lack of trained medical personnel was felt throughout the country, with no medical establishments and few such resources available in the atolls.

Primary focus had to be placed on creating public awareness in the prevention and control of diseases rather than seeking treatment. With the help of concerned authorities and relevant institutions, the immense task was carried out by the national radio successfully creating public awareness through a series of programs broadcast for this purpose.

The public service broadcaster's role played by the national radio in controlling the Cholera and Malaria epidemic of the 1970,s and in creating public awareness to the Shigella outbreak of the early 1980's

were praised by both Maldivians and the international community alike.

Distinguished delegates,

Before tourism became the key component of the Maldives economy, fishing and subsistence agriculture were the main economic activities of the Maldivian people. However, people were equipped with neither the skills nor the will and spirit to carry out these activities on a more effective and sustainable manner.

The national radio played a key role in helping the Government to develop and revolutionize these industries encouraging people to take up modern methods employed worldwide and to adapt to new technologies, significantly contributing to the country's GDP.

The service which began in 1962 with broadcasts of songs and Government announcements soon transformed itself and began using its services as a tool for national development with a clear mandate to inform, educate and entertain the people.

I wish to pay tribute Mr. Keith Jackson of Australia whose expertise and advice were sought by the government of Maldives in the early 1970's to launch a successful career of public service broadcasting in the country.

Shortly after, the Government dispatched five employees of the national radio to the United Kingdom to seek relevant training and made a series of efforts to restructure and shape the national broadcaster to cater to the development needs of the people.

The Government operating on stringent budget nonetheless allocated a significant amount of funds to further the development of the national broadcaster. I'd like to note here, the close cooperation given and

opportunities created by the erstwhile government to facilitate the development of a public service broadcaster.

The experience of public service broadcasting in the Maldives has reaped a multitude of successful results both in terms of socio economic development and for benefit of the people.

However, public service broadcasting in Maldives is now under threat, challenged by political and economic interests, by competition from commercial media and by financial difficulties.

The Maldives experience is testimony that PSB is a basic service required by countries as they charter their course of development. It proves that a public service broadcaster is essential to enhance social, political and cultural citizenship and to promote democracy, good governance and social cohesion.

In recognition of the valuable services being rendered by our local broadcasters, the Broadcast Commission of the Maldives plans to mark a national day of broadcasting every year. I take this opportune moment to call upon stakeholders to declare an International Day of Broadcasting, and give a global platform for the effort that a small country like the Maldives takes at a national level.

Thank you.
