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**SPEECH BY BG (NS) GEORGE YEO,
MINISTER FOR INFORMATION AND THE ARTS
AND MINISTER FOR HEALTH,
AT THE LAUNCH OF CHANNELS PRIME 12
AND PREMIERE 12 OF TV12
ON 1 SEPTEMBER 1995 AT 8.00 PM**

With the reorganization of TV12 into two channels, Prime 12 and Premiere 12, we now have four free-to-air channels in Singapore. If we were a homogeneous society, four channels would be too many. The studies conducted by SBA show that the optimal number of free-to-air channels in Singapore is three because of our limited revenue base, counting both television licence fees and commercial revenue.

We have expanded from three to four channels because we need more prime time to broadcast in all four official languages. Our audience is segmented by language groups. Changes in the broadcast environment force us in this direction. With cable television, satellite TV (the reception of which will be increasingly difficult to control) and Internet, there is a growing flood of choice for the viewers. Free-to-air broadcast will rapidly lose viewership if we cannot put out more programmes at prime time.

From a social point of view, there is a negative side to having four free-to-air channels. Once our viewership is unbundled by language groups, viewers of different language groups will know less of what each other is viewing. As it were, each language group will now have a separate window into the world. At first, the Government was not keen to unbundle because it was socially desirable that Chinese viewers had a sense of what Tamil viewers were watching, and English viewers also had a sense of what Malay viewers were watching. But once it became clear that technology would overtake us if we do not move with

it, we began planning for four channels.

Even though the four channels cater to different viewer segments, it is important that all of them still present and reflect a Singapore point of view. If we succeed in doing this, then it does not matter too much which channel is being watched, because all are still Singapore channels providing different perspectives of our multi-cultural life in Singapore. For this reason, the local production of programmes is very important. It is local productions which root us to our soil in Singapore.

Prime 12 will cater mostly to Malay and Indian viewers. Although more prime time is available, it is not possible to increase the total hours of publicly subsidized programming in any significant way. The reason is financial limitation. Annually, television and radio licence fees yield \$77 m a year. In addition, SBA gets a top-up of 15 per cent of \$11 m a year from the Finance Ministry. SBA thus has a total of \$88 m to subsidize public service broadcasts. Of this money, 28 per cent goes to Malay broadcasts and 16 per cent to Indian broadcasts, compared to 27 per cent for Chinese broadcasts and 29 per cent for English broadcasts. Thus, Malay and Indian broadcasts are already disproportionately subsidized by a big margin. It is not possible to increase this level of subsidy.

Notwithstanding this constraint of limited subsidy, Prime 12 can improve the quality and quantity of its programming. In fact, the very purpose of corporatization is to enable our television stations to do more with the same amount of resources. We must think of various ways and means to raise productivity, increase revenue and cut cost. While we should not reduce the amount of local productions, we should try to source more cheaply. Not all programmes need to be produced in-house in TV12 and TCS. We can contract with production houses outside. We can cooperate with foreign television stations in order to share costs. We can import programmes from Malaysia, Indonesia and elsewhere. If necessary, we can do some dubbing ourselves. We must also try to bring more commercial revenue into the industry. Weekend breakfast programmes in Malay, for example, should be

commercially viable. Where possible, we should also encourage corporate sponsorship.

These are all new areas for Prime 12 to explore. Last year, to help raise the quality of Indian programming, I appointed an Advisory Committee to help SBA, chaired by Mr S Dhanabalan. This year, I mentioned at the Budget Debate in Parliament that a Malay Advisory Committee will also be formed. This Committee will be chaired by Dr Yaacob Ibrahim. He will be assisted by 6 members drawn from a wide cross-section of the Malay community.

Prime 12 must be prepared to recruit talent more aggressively. TCS has been losing talent to other broadcasters in Singapore and overseas. There is no reason why we cannot also make our bid for regional and international talent. Prime 12 should be prepared to recruit good people from anywhere in the world, to help it achieve its mission of providing good-quality Malay and Indian programmes in Singapore.

Premiere 12 should become our local PBS. Premiere 12 should continue to show good programmes from America, Europe, Japan and elsewhere, like Masterpiece Theatre, Earthvisions, international sports and so on. But Premiere 12 should also be a local station giving good coverage of local and regional cultural activities and sports. Premiere 12 will work closely with the National Arts Council and local arts groups to promote the arts in Singapore. To support this effort, SBA has agreed to license a new FM channel for classical music, opera and the arts. The National Arts Council will discuss with Premiere 12, RCS and other interested organizations on the best way to operate such a channel. The audiences for classical music, opera and other art forms are growing for which we are building a concert hall and a lyric theatre at the Esplanade. For this new radio station to be viable, additional financial contribution by corporations and individuals will be needed.

Premiere 12 will also give priority to the coverage of local and regional sports events. The station will work closely

with the Singapore Sports Council and local sports groups to ensure this. For both culture and sports, Premiere 12 will need to build up a core of local personalities whom Singaporean audiences can identify with.

The launch of Prime 12 and Premiere 12 today represents an important step forward for television in Singapore. Black-and-white television was first introduced in 1963 and colour television in 1974. Channel 12 was launched in 1984. Pay television with three channels was started in 1992. Cable television has recently been introduced this year. There is no standing still. All over the world, the broadcast industry is going through a revolution. We will be swamped if we do not react and adjust our position. It is no use complaining about the dislocations brought about by technological change. We should instead analyse carefully the trends, do our calculations and rise to the challenge.

I am confident that Prime 12 and Premiere 12 will rise to the challenge.

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