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SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER MR LEE KUAN YEW AT
SINGAPORE BROADCASTING CORPORATION'S 25TH
ANNIVERSARY DINNER ON 29 APR 88 AT WESTIN PLAZA

On 15 February 1963, television came to Singapore. It was a black and white pilot service of just 1 hour and 30 minutes. Crowds gathered at 52 community centres to watch. Two thousand four hundred watched in homes.

As Singapore grew in the 1960s so did the number of sets. When colour TV started in 1974, there were 252,000 sets. By 1987, 527,000 households or one in 1.2 households had colour sets. Now 24 per cent of all households have more than one set.

Today, SBC transmits 22.5 hours in four languages, over three channels daily.

The Government first decided to introduce television to Singapore in 1961. We believed it was more effective than radio to expose and to debunk by open debate and confrontation the ideas of Barisan Sosialis and their Communist United Front supporters. This turned out to be so.

Television has also made it easier for people to understand government policies.

SBC produces about 40 per cent of the programs it telecasts. Sixty per cent are acquired from abroad. Seventy-two per cent of these are from the English-speaking world - 45 per cent from US, 20 per cent from UK, 4 per cent from Canada, 2.5 per cent from Australia and 0.5 per cent from New Zealand.

American programs have good audience rating and generate revenue. These programs portray Americans and their lifestyle. This unconsciously influences

perceptions and alters Singaporean norms. This cannot be avoided. But their influence can be lessened, provided parents and teachers have imparted basic

Asian core values to our children at home and in school. And if SBC can portray the Singaporean way of life attractively so that our young identify themselves with the TV characters, they can counterbalance the influence of foreign programs.

Producing programs is more expensive than importing them. But if we want to affirm our values, our attitudes to life and our norms, we must portray them in our own programs, those which can hold the interest of Singaporeans.

Production of programs requires a mix of talents: producers, writers, actors, designers, technicians and cameramen. Our talent pool is limited. Producers in UK or Japan have a rich vein of traditional and modern story tellers to draw from. We must encourage and discover a few of our own. Meanwhile, SBC can borrow foreign talent. They can help us and produce Singaporean stories with more polish. And they can impart their skill to Singaporeans if we can get some with talent but without the experience to work with them.

Television is on the threshold of a technological breakthrough that will change the very nature of broadcasting. We already use satellites to receive visuals of news events and sports. Cable TV and satellite dishes have already made their impact in America and Europe. Thousands of viewers receive up to a dozen national or foreign cable television channels daily. By the end of the decade most European viewers will be able to watch several satellite TV channels, plus a host of private stations, transmitted by cable or Direct Broadcast Satellite (DBS). Most will be mass entertainment programs. Cable TV and

satellite dishes will provide infinitely more choices for the homes. Their growth will be phenomenal. This will result in a fragmentation of mass audiences.

Europeans fear that the new technologies will bring a flood of American television programs that will fill the minds of their young. The Culture Ministers of the EEC have considered subsidising trans-European enterprises for mass entertainment programs to counter and compete against American programs. Jack Lang, the French Minister for Culture in Mitterrand's Cabinet until March 1986, had suggested building some kind of cultural bulwark against American media.

What do the new technologies mean to the unity and cohesiveness of young developing societies like Singapore? Hitherto, radio and TV have been key instruments for nation building in developing countries, and not a means to capture consumer advertisers as in America. Can developing countries withstand the massive impact of programs meant for American consumers?

To prevent them from overwhelming us we have prohibited the import of satellite receiving dishes. But we may not be able to check foreign TV intruding into our lives for much longer.

Technological advances will give a wider reach for the transmission of programs of the biggest companies in the biggest countries, those with wealth and talent, especially in entertainment. We must study these developments and try , as best as we can, to filter their inflow into Singapore.

Already our viewership is fragmented. On an average day, of the two million population aged 15 and above, only 14 per cent watch SBC's English news, 33 per cent Mandarin news and 9 per cent Malay news. Forty-one per cent do not watch TV news at all. For "Today in Parliament", the figures are 9 per cent in English and 36 per cent in Mandarin. For other programs, the viewership ranges from 3 per cent to 40 per cent. SBC Chinese drama productions attract 40 per cent. Ten per cent watch video daily.

When I was in London recently, I had eight channels, and in Washington, 12 channels. So the viewership in Britain and America are much more fragmented. The trends are unmistakable.

We must acknowledge that television is mainly showbiz. The most creative people, supported by the strongest companies in the wealthiest countries, will dominate with the kind of programs that will win the biggest number of

home viewers. Then they may slightly alter or tailor the production to suit foreign tastes.

SBC will have to acquire the attributes required for a successful showbiz. Government departments or statutory boards which are restricted by establishment manuals on hiring and firing cannot respond swiftly to the market. The challenge for SBC is: Can you respond and change swiftly to meet the competition and satisfy the needs of our people?

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