Sri Lanka and the Third Communication Revolution

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Abstract

As a result of the convergence of communication satellites, computers and digitization, the world is now undergoing the third communication revolution. Digitization converts all information -- text, sound and pictures -- into a binary code that can promptly travel through a global network of computers linked by telephones, fiber optics and satellites.

Sri Lanka has to face the third revolution head on in order to compete in the global material economy as it moves toward the next millennium. Just as in the case of the Four Tigers, particularly Singapore and Taiwan, Sri Lanka must set a goal to enter the portals of the information society with the sound advice of such bodies as the Computer and Information Technology Council and the Arthur C. Clarke Center for Modern Technologies. With a highly literate workforce, Sri Lanka is in a good position to move from an agriculture/manufacturing-based economy into one that places emphasis on information technology.

To achieve that goal, the government must give the highest priority to rapidly improve the country's telecommunication infrastructure, to propagate the use of computers throughout the country's school system, and to encourage the emergence of information-based industries. LAcNet, a nonprofit organization funded by expatriate Sri Lankans to propel the country's computing development, can play a very important role in helping Sri Lanka's move toward an information-based economy.

While it leapfrogs into the third communication revolution, Sri Lanka must also improve the conditions relating to the traditional mass media -- newspapers, radio, television and cinema -- so that the country can achieve and surpass the minimum standards that UNESCO set in 1962. Sri Lanka should go in the direction of establishing an atmosphere of press and media freedom unparalleled in Asia rather than blindly emulating the restrictive policies of other countries in the name of a peculiar Asian journalism. A good start would be the implementation of the recommendations that the eight-member Goonesekera Committee submitted to the minister for media in mid-1996.

The Third Revolution

The invention of writing created the first communication revolution because it made communication across time and space possible while allowing knowledge to expand infinitely. It was a true revolution because it challenged the authority of those who held power--the elders who preserved and passed on their accumulated knowledge. Johannes Gutenberg's invention of printing with moveable type in the mid-1400s constituted the second revolution in human communication because it challenged the

monopoly on authority that belonged to the rulers and the priests and allowed the spread of vernacular languages and, eventually, democracy. Thus each of these revolutions led to the drastic restructuring of power in the cultures which they affected.

The current communication revolution is in the process of restructuring power in the global society with winners and losers yet to emerge. This revolution -- which marks the convergence of communication satellites, computers and digitization -- will affect every country in the world as the Information Superhighway winds its way across the globe. Information--text, sound and pictures--will move along this superhighway with lightning speed in digital (binary) form. The race on the superhighway will determine the winners who enjoy the fruits of the global economy. The winners will use "racing cars" while the losers will ride "bullock carts."

The racing car metaphor may give the incorrect impression of espousing occidental (Western) values wholesale. Ethical competition is antithetical to neither oriental nor Buddhist values. As Ven. K. Sri Dhammananda points out, Buddhist ethics is rooted in natural law: *akusala kamma* constitutes all actions that have their roots in greed, hatred and delusion that spring from selfishness and thereby foster harmful selfhood. Actions themselves, which include competition, are neither good nor bad because Buddhist ethics is based on intention or volition. Competition can fit well into the Middle Path. The Jataka story of how the good merchant Seruwanija competed against the crooked merchant Kaccaputa illustrates this point. Others may object to the racing car metaphor and argue that the true winners will probably ride bullock carts as a matter of choice in relation to quality of life; and that there is no reason why one cannot be linked to the Information Superhighway from a bullock cart. This, however, depends on how one wants to define quality of life.

Reality of World Economy

This essay argues that Sri Lanka should pave the way now for the smooth and rapid transition of the country's economy from the "bullock cart" to the "racing car" mode. It must get ready to exploit the Information Superhighway to compete in what Andre Gunder Frank calls the "global material economy." Frank says that the developing countries cannot afford to de-link themselves from the so-called capitalist world economy as his original "dependency theory" suggested in the 1960s. Because the material world governs both in the short and the long run, reality demands that each country adopt the economic strategies that enable it to engage in the race on the superhighway to win the benefits of the world economy. To define those strategies in terms of "isms" (capitalism, socialism, etc.) merely obfuscates the issue of world economic reality.

Those who steer the course of the global material economy today are the so-called Group of Seven in which the real decision makers are the United States, Germany and Japan. Their consultatory circle is the 25-member Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the rich man's club of industrialized countries. The Four Tigers--Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan--have emerged victorious in the world-material-economy competition. Singapore, which has achieved a per capita GDP (purchasing power parity) of $21,493 officially disqualified itself as a developing country this year. Hong Kong, which has a per capita GDP of $23,080, is also no longer a developing "colony" because it has surpassed mother Britain's per capita GDP of $18,138.

The other countries of the world remain the "losers" in varying degrees. The ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) countries, to which Singapore belongs, seem to have achieved significant

success in their approach to the global material economy while the SAARC (South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation) countries, to which Sri Lanka belongs, seem to have belatedly understood the nature of the global economic reality. The latter group, except for Sri Lanka and the Maldives, still suffers from widespread illiteracy, a clear obstacle to entering the Information Superhighway.

How Sri Lanka Compares

However, considering Sri Lanka's literacy rate of 88 percent (compared with Bangladesh's 35 percent, Bhutan's 38 percent, India's 48 percent, Nepal's 26 percent and Pakistan's 35 percent), it is in the best position in South Asia to enter the information society just as Singapore has done. Moreover, Sri Lanka's per capita GDP of $3,030 is the highest in South Asia (compared with Bangladesh's $1,350, Bhutan's $1,475, India's $1,280, Nepal's $1,165, Maldives' $1,373 and Pakistan's $2,235). It must move smoothly from an agriculture/manufacturing-based economy into one that places emphasis on information technology and leapfrog into the third communication revolution.

Singapore has a population of 2.8 million in a land area of 633 square kilometers compared with Sri Lanka's population of 18.1 million in a land area of 65,610 square kilometers. However, both are islands with an almost identical literacy rate. To achieve its economic goals, Singapore has tapped the cheaper labor source in neighboring Malaysia. (Once it takes off economically, Sri Lanka will also have the capacity to draw cheaper labor from the neighboring SAARC nations.) Though 6.4 times smaller than Sri Lanka in population, Singapore's gross domestic product of $66 billion is higher than Sri Lanka's $53 billion. In other words, Sri Lanka's GDP should have reached $424 billion today to claim Singapore's current level of economic achievement.

Singapore's achievement is based on the export of computer equipment, rubber and rubber products, petroleum and petroleum products, and telecommunication equipment. Its 1994 exports were valued at $96 billion; its imports were valued at $102 billion and were comprised of mainly aircraft, petroleum, chemicals and foodstuffs. In comparison, Sri Lanka's exports in 1993 added up to a mere $2.9 billion while its imports cost $4 billion. Sri Lanka's exports comprised garments and textiles, teas, diamonds and other gems, petroleum products, other agricultural products, marine products and graphite. Its imports were comprised of textiles and textile materials, machinery and equipment, transport equipment, petroleum and building materials. Thus Sri Lanka's current export-import pattern shows a "bullock cart" approach to travel on the Information Superhighway. Singapore, on the other hand, is determined on the "racing car" approach: the government has used its powers to greatly influence the direction and speed of adoption of telecommunication and information technologies.

A better sense of Sri Lanka's current situation can be obtained through comparison with the other 11 countries of the world that are very close to its population size. In rank order of their geographical size, these countries are Australia (7.7 million square kilometers), Kazakstan (2.7 million sq. km), Saudi Arabia (2.1 million sq. km), Venezuela (912,050 sq. km), Mozambique (801,590 sq. km), Afghanistan (652,090 sq. km), Iraq (438,317 sq. km.), Malaysia (329,758 sq. km), Uganda (241,038 sq. km), Ghana (2 38,533 sq. km), and Taiwan (36,140 sq. km). While Sri Lanka has the fifth highest literacy rate within this group (with Australia, Kazakstan, Taiwan and Venezuela ahead of it), its per capita GDP ranks ninth (with only Ghana, Uganda and Mozambique trailing it).

(Five countries in the world - Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Sierra Leone and Togo - approximate Sri Lanka's geographical size. However, they are not comparable to Sri Lanka in their population size, ranging from Latvia's 2.6 million to Sierra Leone's 4.4 million.)

Taiwan v. Sri Lanka

The country that is closest to Sri Lanka in terms of both population and geographical size is Taiwan, one of the Four Tigers. While Taiwan has only 55 percent of Sri Lanka's geographical area, it exceeds Sri Lanka's population by more than 3 million. Taiwan's current gross domestic product is $279 billion. In 1994, half of its $93 billion of exports was comprised of electrical machinery, electronic products and textiles. Half of its $85 billion of imports was made up of machinery and equipment, electronic products, chemicals, and iron and steel. Thus its export-import pattern also reflects a readiness to enter the third communication revolution because of its emphasis on electronic products.

Taiwan's labor force of 7.9 million (1989) is engaged in industry and commerce (53 percent), service (22 percent), agriculture (15 percent) and civil administration (7 percent). In contrast, Sri Lanka's labor force of 6.6 million (1985) engaged in agriculture (45.9 percent), mining and manufacturing (13.3 percent), trade and transport (12.4 percent) and services and other (4.4 percent). These data show the difference between the "racing car" and the "bullock cart" approach. In Taiwan, agriculture contributes about 4 percent to GDP, down from 35 percent in 1952. Taiwan currently ranks as No. 13 among major trading countries. More capital-and technology-intensive industries are steadily replacing traditional labor-intensive industries. Taiwan has become a major investor in China, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam. Taiwan has a per capita GDP of $13,235, an inflation rate of 3.7 percent and an unemployment rate of below 2 percent. Sri Lanka, on the other hand, has an inflation rate of 11.2 percent and an unemployment rate of around 13 percent. Taiwan's reserves stand at $89.6 billion, second only to Japan's $200 billion, with no foreign debt. Sri Lanka's reserves stand at $2.1 billion with a foreign debt of $6.4 billion. Thus Sri Lanka can learn much from the approach to the global material economy that Taiwan has taken.

Heeding Galtung's Advice

Norwegian scholar Johan Galtung, who recently analyzed "geopolitical transformations and the 21st century world economy," says that the geoeconomic winners will be those countries that pay serious attention to the management of three economic indicators: the Q/P factor: the ratio between the quality and the price of a product or service; the C/N factor: the degree of processing of a product or service from its raw or natural (N) state to the processed or cultured (C) state; and the F/R factor: the synchrony between the growth rate of the finance (F) economy of financial assets and the growth rate of the real (R) economy of other products and services.

The winners will keep all three factors within bounds. Galtung asserts that the economic decline of the United States has set in because there all three factors are in disarray compared with the European Union, Japan and the Four Tigers. If Sri Lanka were to heed Galtung's advice, it must transform its economy into the production of goods and services that are high both on the Q/P ratio and the C/N degree while not allowing the F/R synchrony to go berserk. It simply has to compete vigorously in the global material economy and get into the "racing car" mode. Sri Lanka should take advantage of its highly literate workforce to engender "brain-power" industries related to the third communication revolution.

This transformation clearly entails making Sri Lanka a sort of Silicon Valley just as Bangalore in India and Putrajaya in Malaysia have lately succeeded in doing. (Other examples of communities that have moved telecommunications to the head of the economic development agenda include Richardson, Texas; the state of New Jersey; LaGrange, Georgia; and Atlanta, also in Georgia. Boston's Route 128 and North Carolina's Research Triangle are typical examples of high-technology clusters.) If Sri Lanka were to produce software at a high-level of Q/P and C/N to compete in the global market, it would invariably leapfrog into the "racing car" mode on the Information Superhighway provided it continues to improve its telecommunication structure, particularly with more fiber optics. Impressively, 70-80 percent of the Telecom plant in Sri Lanka is fully digital already. In the process, Sri Lanka can implant competitive electrical, electronic and telecommunication industries and make it attractive for multinational giants to set up shop as well.

The Board of Investments has identified telecommunications as a high-priority area. Several foreign technology companies are already operating in the country: Golden Systems Inc., Innodata Corp., NEC Corp. and Pacific Dunlop. The 1993 estimates of the workforce in the electronics, computer and communication companies ranged from 5,000 to 8,000. Moreover, the government has issued a telecommunication development plan (1996-1998) to expand telephone lines into rural areas . With greater effort, the country may be able to manufacture its own computers at the most competitive Q/P level before the turn of the century.

Sri Lanka's Teledensity

Sri Lanka has an official 185,724 telephone lines (in addition to about 50,000 cellular phones thanks to Call Link, Calltell, Mobitel and MTN), a teledensity of 1.3 per 100 people. Only about 12 percent of these telephone lines are outside the Colombo area. This compares very unfavorably with the teledensity of 50 per 100 people in Singapore or 36.3 in Taiwan. The teledensities for SAARC countries are: Bangladesh, 0.23; Bhutan, 0.25; India, 0.89, Maldives, 4.21; Nepal, 0.35, and Pakistan, 1.24. Thus, even within the subcontinent, the Maldives is ahead of Sri Lanka while Pakistan has caught up.

Because telecommunication development precedes the entry into information society, Sri Lanka must give the highest priority to this aspect. Computer networks depend on modems hooked onto telephone lines. A backbone network needs high-speed (band-width) circuits that must go well beyond the few 64K circuits that Sri Lanka Telecom can provide at present. As Abhaya Induruwa, a computer science don at the University of Moratuwa, clarifies: "Once the backbone is up and running, the public and other off-line users can have access to the network using modems and telephone lines." Although it looks as if the abundant availability of high-speed digital leased lines for networking is a long way off, right priorities can bring about a quicker solution.

A Silicon Valley cannot develop without an efficient telecommunication structure. Sri Lanka has to make computers available to every school on the island to promote computer literacy. But this cannot happen until the country comes to grips with the telecommunication dilemma first. William Read and Jan Youtie argue that telecommunications promote economic development through (a) attracting firms and helping existing firms become more productive; (b) creating opportunities in rural areas; and (c) enabling distance learning and telemedicine.

In the 1990s, the emphasis is clearly on telecommunication rather than mass media as a tool of development. An unofficial 1983 study by the World Bank concluded that the developing countries

should extend telecommunication services to their rural areas. A 1983 report by the OECD and the ITU emphasized the importance of telecommunication for economic growth. The 1984 Maitland Report recognized the importance of shifting available resources to telecommunication rather than to massive new investment programs. It recommended the setting up of a global center for telecommunication development. Sam Pitroda, an Indian telecommunication expert, has estimated that the addition of a single phone line contributes an average of $3,700 to GDP in developing countries .

Andres B. Bande, president of Ameritech International Inc., says that telecom infrastructure and service are "linchpins of a healthy, growing economy" -- the backbone of business activity, productivity and trade. He says that effective telecom services are a precondition to the emergence of a strong market economy in a developing country. He points out that telecommunication brings about important technological and social change: openness, connectivity, decentralization and accessibility. Thus extending telecom service into remote areas is bound to generate economic growth. He cautions: "However, in weighing costs and benefits, one must remember that at some point, in some configurations, the quality of national life could actually decline with merely more telecommunications."

Telecom Options

What investment options do developing countries like Sri Lanka have to modernize their telecom structure and service? Bande offers four: state intervention, as in the case of France Telecom; bank loans; multilateral lending institutions like the World Ban k and WorldTel, a new organization that seeks to promote telecom growth in developing countries; and foreign investment. If there are limitations associated with the first three options, Bande says that developing countries should not hesitate to explore foreign investment after weighing its advantages and disadvantages. Bande cautions: "Privatization involving foreign participation provides attractive opportunities for nations in the periphery to secure capital and other needed resources. But it also raises sovereignty, regulatory, and balanced growth issues that must be anticipated and managed properly."

Sri Lanka is in the process of privatizing the telecommunication industry using the foreign investment option, as well as the state intervention option. The Sunday Observer (Jan. 14, 1996) reported that the government was consider granting two more licenses to independent telecommunication companies to set up business, in addition to re-structuring the Sri Lanka Telecom Corp. (set up in September 1991). The Ministry of Posts and Telecommunication expects the two new companies--Telia AB of Sweden and BCI Inc. of the United States--to provide 200,000 new wireless local loop telephone connections through by the year 2000 (Sunday Times, May 5, 1996). The government's intention is to introduce a range of modern telecommunication technology "to the doorstep of the average Sri Lankan consumer."

Meanwhile, the government is in the process of finding a strategic partner for Sri Lanka Telecom. The Public Enterprise Reforms Commission (PERC) has chosen the Deutsche Morgan Grenfell, DFCC, Deloitte Touche Tohmastu International, and Slaughter and May investment banks and telecommunication consultancy firms to restructure the corporation, which expects to sell 15-20 percent of its shares to raise capital. During the last few years, the corporation's investment on expansion was limited to about $400, 000 (Rs 21 million). But the new projects undertaken this year would require an additional Rs 20 million. The government's view is that allowing more telecommunication companies to operate in Sri Lanka would prevent any company becoming monopolistic.

During 1994-1995, Sri Lanka added 24,200 new telephones. It also commissioned 17 new exchanges islandwide to facilitate STD and IDD facilities. Telecom is setting up 18 exchanges to provide 67,000 cable pairs in the Colombo Metro area. A digital satellite earth station and an international gateway exchange were commissioned last year.

Looking at Year 2000

While the above clearly indicates Sri Lanka's awareness of the importance of telecommunications in economic development, one should question whether the planned rate of progress would be sufficient to enable the country to enter the portals of information society by the turn of the century.

Assuming the unofficial estimate of 300,000 telephones on the island at present, how many telephones would the country have by the year 2000? If you add the planned 200,000 new wireless telephone connections plus another 100,000 at the mid-decade annual rate of growth, the total number of telephones would approximate 600,000 -- a teledensity of 3 per 100 people (assuming a population of about 20 million). This is a far cry from the present teledensity of any of the Four Tigers: Singapore's 50, Hong Kong' s 54.1, Taiwan's 36.3 and South Korea's 39.7. Even reaching the goal of a million telephones by 2000, as a committee had proposed, seems remote at the present pace. Clearly, Sri Lanka has to do much more to get into the "racing car" mode.

Sri Lanka's computer density is most likely to lag behind its telephone density. It has an estimated 60,000 computers at present (Daily News, March 17, 1996) -- a density of 0.3 per 100 people. India's recent gift of 100 computers (Daily News, May 16, 19 96) will improve that density only slightly. This is hardly sufficient in the march toward the third communication revolution. Computerization and telecommunication expansion have to go hand in hand.

However, despite the lack of a developed infrastructure, the Lanka Educational Academic & Research Network (L.E.A.R.N.) had in 1989 pioneered connecting Sri Lanka to the Information Superhighway with subsequent support from Lanka Academic Network (LAcNet), a volunteer organization of computer-savvy expatriate Sri Lankans. Enterprising commercial entities--e.g., Lanka Internet Services Ltd. and Information Laboratories (Infolab) Ltd.--have now emerged to strengthen that connection together with Sri Lanka Telecom Corp.

These companies are showcasing the country's English-language newspapers [Daily News and Sunday Observer (since Sept. 4, 1995) and Sunday Times (since March 1996)] and the broadcasting stations [TNL (since February 1996) and SLBC (scheduled since April 9, 1996)] on the Internet's most popular information depository, the World Wide Web. (Meanwhile, the Union Bank has set up a Website that provides English translations of the island's Sinhala and Tamil press.) LAcNet has been a vigorous force behind these developments.

More than 3,000 expatriate Sri Lankans, irrespective of their location in the world, are now able to receive and transmit news and information on their mother country through a moderated electronic mailing list called Sri Lanka Net, funded and administered by LAcNet since 1988. Sri Lanka can actively seek the expertise of the LAcNet volunteers, as well as those experts connected to SLNet, on the best and the fastest way to reach the portals of information society.

Expatriate interest groups have also formed virtual communities through Websites such as Friends of Sri Lanka in the United States (FOSUS), Save Our Sri Lanka (SOS) and Tamilnet to disseminate their views on

the country's ethnic conflict. The moderated SL Net Forum also provides opportunities to exchange views on numerous other topics. The Usenet newsgroup, soc.culture.sri-lanka, provides unmoderated discussion of Sri Lankan issues.

Some expatriates, particularly those in the academic community, have set up their own Websites to facilitate virtual communication. A Sri Lankan student at American University, Nishanthi Mendis, has a Website on a subject related to this essay: the state of information technology in Sri Lanka. These developments have had a positive outcome: the ability to be in real-time touch with Sri Lankan developments irrespective of one's location in the world. This essay, written in a remote Midwestern community in the United States, is the product of online research -- a facility that many who live in Sri Lanka still do not have.

Within Sri Lanka itself, an important development is the setting up of the Industrial, Technology and Market Information Network (ITMIN), a collaboration between state and private sectors, to serve as Sri Lanka's first information brokerage service (Sunday Observer, Jan. 28, 1996). The UNDP and UNIDO are behind this network, a conduit for technology transfer and a clearing house for information on business, industry, technology and markets. ITMIN, which connects 10 state and private organizations, will also provide access to the Internet.

Just as in the case of Singapore, the government should continue to encourage the "brainpower" vital for software development. In March this year, the Sri Lanka Export Development Board (EDB) with the assistance of the Sri Lanka Embassy in Germany organized a national stand at the CeBIT '96, the International Exhibition for Information and Telecommunication in Hanover. Four Sri Lankan software companies -- Informatics (Pvt.) Ltd., DMS Software Engineering Ltd., Jagath Robotics (Pvt.) Ltd. and Golden Key Co. Ltd. -- displayed their software packages developed for hotels, banks, hospitals and plantations, along with their packages for vehicle management, hire purchase and cellular telephone billing systems.

In 1993, Sri Lanka had 30 software producers, seven of whom earned $2 million in software exports that year. Depending on their Q/P and C/N levels, such software will win or lose in the global market. But continuing encouragement to develop computer software is a step in the right direction.

CINTEC and Cybercafes

The Computer and Information Technology Council (CINTEC), the apex government agency for information technology, and Sri Lanka Telecom are aiming to connect academic, business and government activities to the Internet (Sunday Times, March 19, 1995). CINTEC has helped L.E.A.R.N., a wide-area network covering the island's universities, to access the Internet despite the "astronomical" cost involved -- with a subsidy of Rs. 1 million for the initial year. The University Grants Commission has put in Rs. 5 million for the project, an undertaking of the University of Moratuwa. On the recommendation of CINTEC, the Ministry of Education has set up more than 10 regional computer centers -- out of a planned total of 300 centers by the year 2000 -- to prepare students for the National Certificate in Computer Applications. CINTEC is also collaborating with the Computer Society of Sri Lanka (CSSL) to conduct the National Examination in Computer Studies.

Moreover, under the guidance of CINTEC, the Federation of Information Technology Industry in Sri Lanka (FITIS) has emerged as the national organization representing the country's IT industry (Daily

News, Feb. 27, 1996). FITIS represents software industries, computer vendors and computer trainers. Other interest groups -- such as CSSL, Computer Land and Informatics Institute of Computer Studies -- have also emerged as part of L.E.A.R.N.

Another fascinating development is the emergence of several cybercafes in Sri Lanka starting with The Surfboard at the Galadari Hotel and The Cyber Cafe in Union Place (Sunday Times, March 10, 1996). These cybercafes will allow those who cannot afford their own computer or their own Internet connection to surf the Internet for a fee. This points out the "astronomical" cost of accessing the Information Superhighway under the present inadequate IT structure in Sri Lanka.

While Ceycom Global Communication Ltd. has teamed up with COMSAT to launch Sri Lanka's first satellite services network with an investment of $40 million with the aim of linking offices and homes to multiple information sources via satellite, one has to wonder about the social costs the country will have to face when the benefits of the Information Superhighway are unequally sliced in favor of a tiny elite.

Traditional Media

The march toward information society also entails the rapid development of the traditional media: newspapers, radio and television in particular. UNESCO pronounced a minimum set of goals for developing countries in 1962: five radio receivers, two cinema seats and a daily newspaper circulation of 10 copies for every 100 inhabitants. Sri Lanka now has an estimated 20 radio receivers, 1.4 cinema seats and a daily newspaper circulation of 5.7, as well as 4.9 television sets, for every 100 inhabitants. While Sri Lanka leads all SAARC countries on these indicators, it is inexcusable that in a highly literate country the daily newspaper circulation has not been able to reach the minimum set by UNESCO 34 years ago. One should compare this with Singapore's 35.5, South Korea's 40.7 or even Malaysia's 11.7. While Sri Lanka has surpassed the old minima relating to radio and television, many Asian and African countries have done far better, particularly in regard to radio.

Restrictive press policies, including a government-imposed press council, seem inappropriate for a highly literate democratic society that believes in the Buddhist principles of tolerance and independent thinking. Contrary to Singapore's authoritarian trend, South Korea and Taiwan have allowed increasing press freedom. The present government can set an example of press freedom for the whole of Asia, where some countries are defending press restrictions in the name of a peculiar Asian journalism. It can establish the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd. as a public company that will attract the country's best independent journalists.

As a start, the government ought to implement the recommendations of the Goonesekera committee on media law reform in respect of the constitution and the media, the Parliamentary Privileges Act, contempt of court and other matters (Sunday Times, June 2, 1996). It should even go further and allow the industry to form its own media council rather than replacing the Press Council Law with a Media Council Law. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution makes this simple assertion: "Congress shall make no law respecting ... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." If democracy means a "government of the people, by the people, for the people," then the media must become the voice of the people. The Fourth Estate must have the independence to critique the three arms of the government: executive, legislative and judicial.

One must not construe the preceding plea as a slavish acceptance of occidental values, including a Western definition of press freedom. It's not an endorsement of Western news values that promote elitism, negativism and personalization in a highly commercialized context. The deplorable knowledge of public affairs and international affairs among the American public reflects poorly on the performance of the U.S. media.

Therefore, the present plea is not for the Sri Lankan media to emulate the negative traits of the Western media. The goal should be the development of a socially responsible media with the least interference in media freedom by the government. Media education at secondary and tertiary levels, as well as training of journalists to reflect the social norms of the country, is far more important than imposing legal restraints. Japan's success in promoting high-quality journalism within the Japanese social context is worthy of study.

Conclusion

It seems fair to conclude that despite outward appearances of progress toward entering the Third Communication Revolution, the steps Sri Lanka has taken so far are grossly inadequate to transform the country's telecommunication structure into one that would enable it to compete effectively in the global material economy. Much bigger investments in information technology will be necessary to enter the Information Superhighway at lower social cost so that the benefits will spread beyond a privileged minority. This means drastically reducing the "astronomical" cost of telecommunication.

Sri Lanka can also set an example in press freedom for the whole of Asia. It can create an environment conducive to a massive increase in daily newspaper circulation through newsprint and postal subsidies and other devices. High newspaper circulation and readership are hallmarks of a highly literate and educated society.

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