

Cultural Implications of International Broadcasting in Bangladesh

by Khan Sarwar Murshid

This is a slightly revised and enlarged version of a talk given by the author at a seminar held under the joint auspices of the BBC World Service and the National Institute of Mass Communication in Dhaka in February 1993.

WHEN the BBC asked me to take part in a seminar to be held in Dhaka on what was called 'Broadcasting Future', my inclination was to say no. I was aware that I did not know enough about the technology, sociology, economics, and politics of international broadcasting to be able to talk on the subject with confidence or any degree of illumination. I was, however, reminded of a Japanese proverb according to which life was an endless debt which man must go on paying and that I had a great debt to the international broadcasting community which I shared with my nation. A large section of that community gave us memorable and heart-warming support during our Liberation War in 1971 and our struggle against autocracy in 1990. During these crises one great broadcasting institution, namely, the BBC was co-opted to Bengal hearts as Bangladesh Broadcasting Corporation. It was therefore in the spirit of repaying a small part of this debt, in a personal way, that I agreed to speak on the cultural implications of international broadcasting, the topic assigned to me for discussion.

I do not expect to be able to raise any strictly virginial issues, but may I begin by pausing a little over the stock-exchange metaphor of 'futures' and wondering if it was chosen in recognition, ironic or otherwise, of an aspect of the 'cultural' reality of international broadcasting. At any rate, it has enough ambiguity of suggestion in it (including the Hindu idea of reincarnation) for me to argue that investment in international broadcasting 'futures' is more secure than investment in any 'commodities futures'. My reasons are two fold: international broadcasting serves the primal desire to know, which is as old and deep as Adam and Eve, whether it is served through the ear or the eye or through both. Also it is founded on the imperishable need to speak, hear, and see, all indispensable methods of

outreach to fellow human beings. I cannot imagine a time when the human race would abandon the miracle of instantaneity, simultaneity, and spread achieved by radio and television through the collapse of time horizons, because the 'global village' thus created, could never be wished away for fear of the burden of awareness of the obligations of action. Also the benefits of these two media, I am sure, would be found to over-weigh their risks and frustrations.

It is obvious that the cultural implications of international broadcasting in Bangladesh, for that matter, in any country, are bound to be varied and complex. It would perhaps be good, for perspective, to bear in mind a few facts about Bangladesh and its people as we deliberate here: it is a society which has been colonized twice, first by Britain, then by Pakistan; it has endured autocracy for most of its history since its emergence as an independent country except for short periods; it is irrepressibly 'democratic'; its pluralism is now under some threat from religious fundamentalism; its cultural expression is strongly biased towards the verbal; violence is an increasingly dark and pervasive feature of its politics; its people are intensely proud of their language and culture and fought a war for these, among other things; they are, in fact,

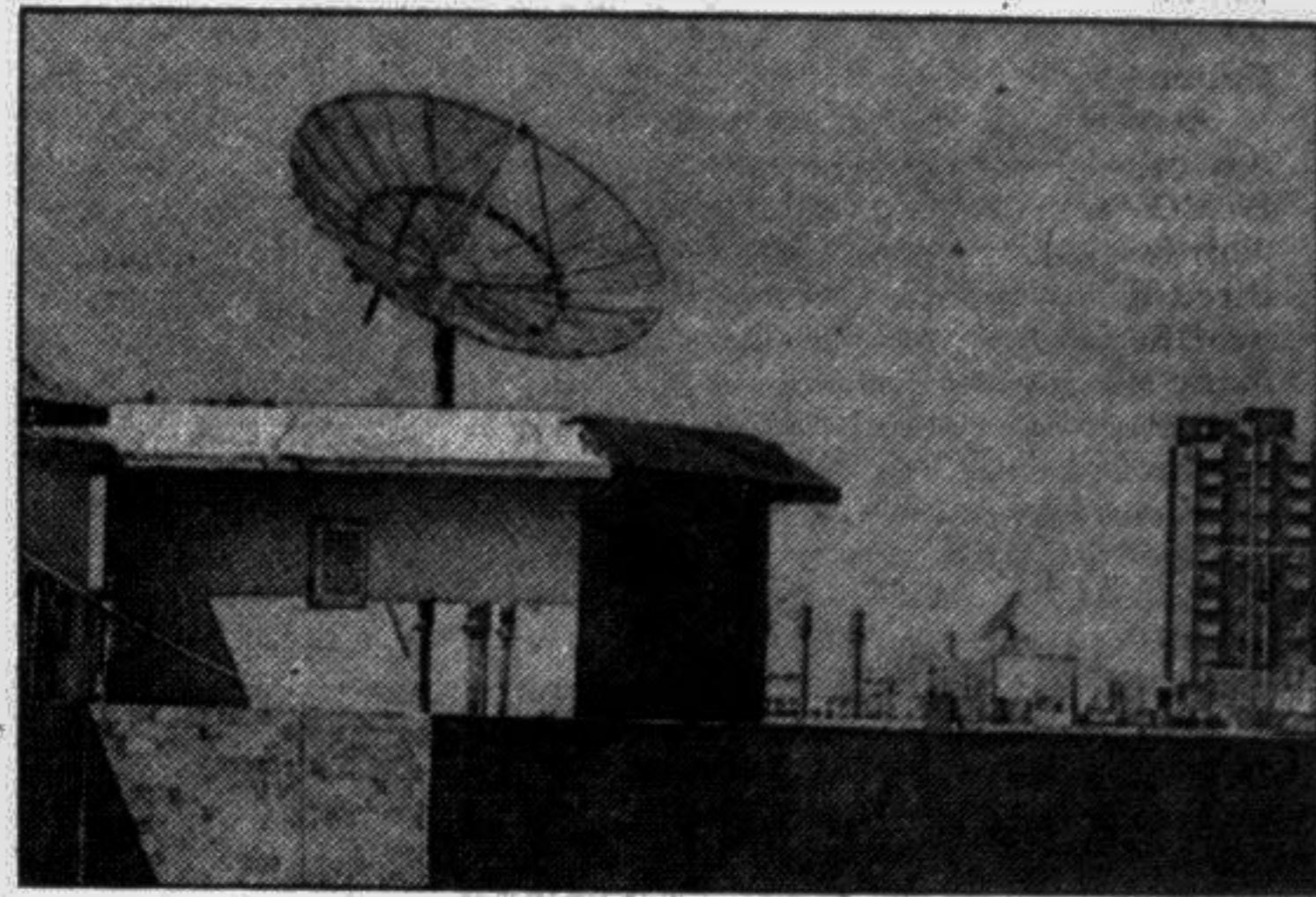
an insecure, not always humourless, people, subject to recurrent horrific natural calamities, political unrest, fears and suspicions; they are nevertheless capable of generous acceptance and assimilation from, as it were, a subterranean source of assurance; a very small proportion of these hundred and ten million people command decent material conditions of existence; only one out of five of them knows how to read and write but although short on letters they are, by and large, gifted with ears and eyes. A society with a profile like this would naturally have its own way of responding and relating to 'speech' and 'image', that is, what comes through the eye, in international broadcasting. Indeed, one of the main concerns of broadcasting across the 'otherness' of race, culture, language, and ideology, is how to relate. This is something I wish to return to later.

A few words at this stage about the international broadcasting scene in Bangladesh. It is dominated by the BBC for reasons of history, quality, and the range of programmes, although people here tune in to all the major broadcasting stations of the world including the VOA, Radio Moscow, Radio Peking, Radio Tokyo, Deutsche Valley Radio, Radio Netherlands, Radio Sydney, and All India Radio. As for television broadcasts, those

from India can be received with normal antennae while the Hongkong based Star TV programmes can be received through the dish antenna. The latter has caught on and is already a modest presence. Interestingly, it can be seen in conservative old Dhaka and advanced and sophisticated new Dhaka alike. The CNN and the BBC World Service, the former introduced some months ago and the latter only recently, are accessible for a little over forty hours a week through Bangladesh TV. I have, however, no way of determining how many of which social groups give their ear and eyes to which station. There is little doubt, though, that the BBC enjoys the greatest popularity and authority in respect of broadcasts for the ear. It has, by the way, given rise to some amusing folk lore about its legendary ubiquitous reach. I have here the space to recall the aide of a President solemnly asking a colleague to ring up the BBC to find out what his boss was discussing at that very moment with a visitor in the next room! Finally, according to the Government Bureau of Statistics, roughly about 24 million people in this country own licensed radio receivers while slightly more than half a million possess licensed television receivers. These figures would improve significantly if unlicensed receivers of both kinds are taken

into account. Now, what sort of questions do these data enable us to ask and answer? Could we perhaps ask: What is the state of our awareness of international broadcasting, both as a consumer package and as a system of information with its own organizational philosophy, within and outside the establishment? We know that Bangladesh Government has for some time now given hospitality, through BT, to the CNN, a news dominated network, whose programmes we have had the time to judge, as well as to the BBC. One would like to know about its consequences in terms of response, now that a growing section of BT's viewers are regularly exposed to two worlds alternately. We do not know the professional or governmental perceptions of these things. We do not have the urban-rural breakdown, or age-affluence-education-wise distribution, of receiving sets. We do not know why their owners listen or watch or what they listen to or watch and why. They probably do resent and resist some ideas and images that come to them and it is necessary to establish what or why. The actual size of the audience of international broadcasting is not definitely known, but it is bound to be small. We can only make guesses about most of these matters but the rough fact is

that international broadcasting in Bangladesh has acquired a visual dimension with the introduction of Star TV, the CNN and lately the BBC, and that its audience is on the increase. Coming to individual broadcasting agencies having to do with the ear, we can say with reasonable certainty that the BBC's or the VOA's pop music has a significantly wide audience among youthful listeners and that the BBC's programme of 'high culture' consisting of classical music, poetry, drama, and book review, etc, have an audience, mainly among the more aged and, perhaps, the educated. We can also add that the world service news and commentary on world affairs, along with the Bengali Service, which is said to have an estimated audience of 8.9 million listeners, enjoy wide popularity across the age divide and that in times of crisis, local or international, listeners in this country turn overwhelmingly to the BBC, with the VOA as a second source of information. Clearly, I have 'guessed' too much, but my questions and comments in this context have been designed not only to illustrate my ignorance but to stress the need for research. I spoke earlier of the problem of relating involved in international broadcasting which is obviously a two-way business. Bangladesh generally receives the attention of the international electronic media

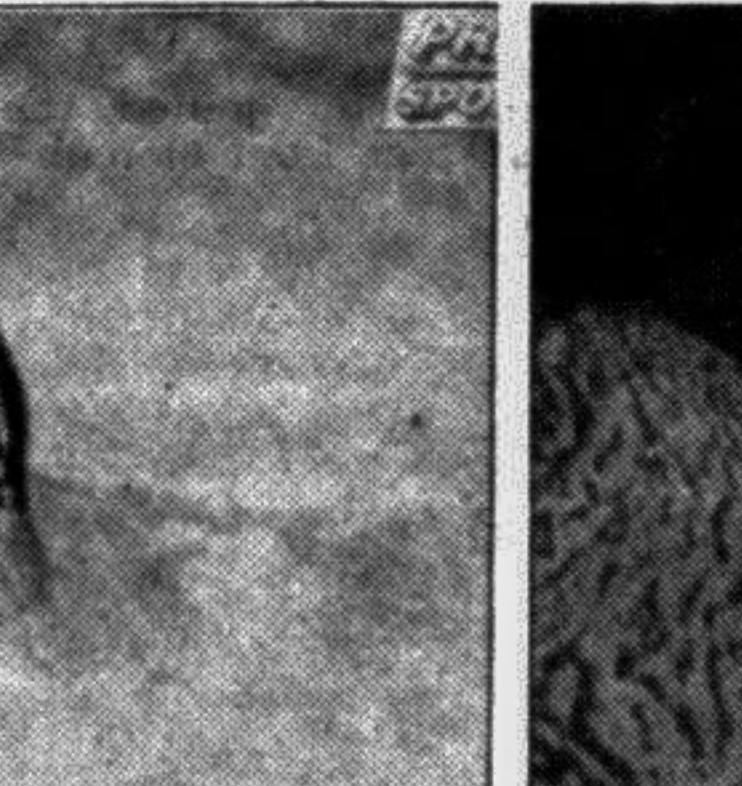
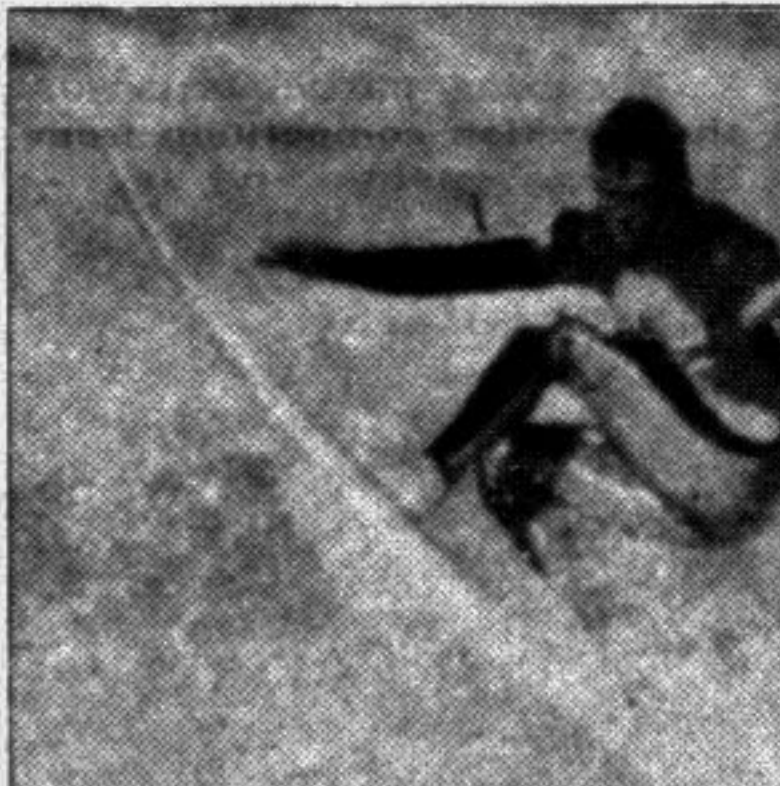


because of its natural disasters, political turmoil, and misery. We naturally relate well to the compassion of the images of natural calamities but a relentless emphasis on them to the exclusion, say, of the heroic effort to rebuild life after total destruction does alienate. No nation wants to be permanently 'stereocast' for its misery. The BBC's representation, in its Programme Guide for January 1993, of India through the image of the famous Tajmahal and that of Bangladesh through the image of an emaciated woman scavenging for food, illustrates this attitude amply. There is a throbbing cultural life, there are environmental problems, and development activities — these should be noticed to correct the balance. On the other hand, a broadcasting institution like the BBC in its reporting of the political affairs of Bangladesh not only relates to us very well, it gets our politicians to relate to one another by giving them opportunities to give their, often opposed, versions of the same events to the public. This has its place in objective journalism and is rather close to the mediatory journalism practised by the BBC at home as when it brings face to face senior members of the two main parties in Britain after a major speech by the Prime Minister or a senior Cabinet Minister. We are on less happy

world's stage, America has assumed its moral and intellectual leadership backed by its now unchallenged military might. The 'new international order' bequeathed by George Bush to Bill Clinton is a totally American 'order'. No liberal regard for the individuality of other nations, especially the weak ones, is there! The Western media from which information flows towards us, the peripheral nations, operate from within the present structure of international power relations. They are, by and large, apologists for the Western perception of the world and the American approved gospel of market economics and related values without reference to any possible alternatives. And the system is too powerful for its occasional empathetic dissidents to make any impression on it. There is openness without the ability or humility to understand others and the inevitable Western slant dictated by self-interest, or, worse, prejudice. We know that an important medium, namely television, has its critics. It has been described as a product of late capitalism devoted to the promotion of a consumerist culture, the stimulation of needs and wants as well as desires and fantasies, all aimed at the creation of the politics of distraction from serious issues of life as part of the strategy to sustain a buoyant level of consumer demand so as to keep capitalist production and profit high. If this is true of television in its own 'metropolitan' context, what happens if the context shifts to the 'periphery' and the authors of television remain the same? But to return to the criticism of television offered here: one wonders whether or not it explains a part of the motive that went into the Gulf war. After all, it dazzled potential buyers of arms by its display of 'super-tech' weaponry. Add to this television's capacity to create instant worldviews, images of coherence, and versions of reality through tricks of montage and collage which actually excludes reality or merely touches its surface. Images beamed from the economic and political power centres of the West, then, could seek to manipulate us into its order, that is, into seeing their interest as our own. I am not only talking of the mirror of malicious eyes, but one that makes you accept a shape that is not yours. Talking of capitalist manipulation, I am reminded of the 'classic' popular TV show called 'Dallas', produced from the 'heartland' of capitalism and viewed by millions across the globe. It is a picture of entrepreneurial drive, family loyalty and deceit, greed, lust, rape, murder, and the ethic of 'it's yours — go and get it' and has a clear, but not entirely pleasant, political and economic message. The film presents the rapacity, waste, and sordidness of the capitalist way of life so well and forcefully that it is difficult to see how it could wean people away from 'collectivist' thoughts to the blisses of capitalism which, in America as elsewhere in the West, has created a 'contented majority' alone with what looks like a permanent and growing under class. In this case at least manipulation seems to fail in its objective in the eyes of the sensitive and the informed. In this post-cold war era, the era of the Gulf-war and its continued cruel nemesis for Iraqis, in the era of the reawakened ancient fears of the dark 'Islamic menace', as a consequence of which Bosnian Muslims are being allowed to be exterminated, we could go on talking of the inequities of the present international order and its many tangents, but we must reach some conclusions on the effects of international broadcasting. Knowing as I do that it is not easy for us, situated as we are, to escape economic, political or cultural domination or influence, I must assert the cardinal fact that international broadcasting is about open society, open in-



Now at the fingertips



Star TV satellite: looming large over Asia.

AUSTRALIAN media baron Rupert Murdoch has said he wants to bring American popular culture to the rest of the world.

Given the overwhelming power of television, and given Murdoch's enormous holdings in newspapers and television, which include the Fox network in the United States and the satellite system British Sky Broadcasting, few doubt his ability to wield unprecedented influence.

How is it that this man can claim as a privilege of his position the right to influence the minds and hearts of citizens throughout the globe?

Opinion varies from merciless condemnation to open adulation, depending, largely, on a person's impressions of Murdoch the businessman. He is the pet bogey of all left-wing circles, a man accused of dragging downmark a hundred newspapers throughout the world, including *The Times* of London.

Tens of thousands of people who lost their jobs as he took over their companies and made them profitable hate him. Others showered with high salaries and rewards speak of him warmly.

A former columnist of the *Chicago Sun Times* says "no self-respecting dead fish would want to be wrapped in Murdoch paper," and Harry Evans, a former editor of *The Times* and *Sunday Times*, describes him as "restless, brooding, moody, petulant and very right-wing."

Andrew Knight, the present chief executive of *Times Newspapers* and a multi-millionaire in his own right, says he "cannot imagine life without Rupert". He ascribes "fantastic qualities of generalship" to Murdoch.

News Emperor of the World

For the second time round Australian tycoon Rupert Murdoch has bought the famed *New York Post*. Murdoch is the biggest media power-broker in history. Press barons of yesteryear influenced the views of whole nations. Today modern technology had made it possible for news empires to touch the entire world. A book by British writer William Shawcross examines Murdoch's life. Gemini News Service examines the book, the man and the empire.

Hazhir Teirmourian writes from London

Sir William Rees-Mogg, under whose editorship I first joined *The Times*, has just returned as a columnist to the paper from which he was sacked by Murdoch in 1981. "I'm coming home," he says, implying that the paper has not been made unacceptable by the intervening years.

It is not easy to admire Murdoch unless, apparently, you are a close friend or assistant. From afar, as you watch him jumping from city to city around the globe, he appears an almost demonic figure with boundless energy and endless appetite for material acquisitions.

Does he not realise, one asks oneself, that he will not live for ever? What can be the pleasure of owning yet another newspaper or television station or transport company when he already has difficulty remembering the names of them all? What, indeed, can be the point of spending one's last years aboard small jet aircraft constantly on the telephone talking about the latest company accounts?

In *Murdoch* (Chatto & Windus, London), author William Shawcross paints Murdoch as driven by something other

than money. At the end of the book these questions remain still largely valid, but much information also emerges to show that Murdoch feels a need to be involved in the greatest events that shape the future of the planet.

He wants to be among, and to be courted by, those who make the most important decisions. He is bored by inactivity, and finds luxury unattractive. His private jet is much less comfortable than those belonging to his deputies. He is the Ghengis Khan of 20th Century capitalism, if we allow that Ghengis Khan also may have had strong moral convictions.

"Murdoch uses his papers in the same way as every other press baron," Shawcross told me at his London home. "He wants to wield political influence. He pushes for the election of politicians he approves of, and he pushes the economic policies that he thinks suit him in the longer term."

Shawcross went on to say that, for example, in Britain *The Times* had supported the Conservative Party since Murdoch took the paper over. "But *The Times* would have done that, anyway, no matter



RUPERT MURDOCH
The media mughal

which press baron owned it." Indeed, the influence of the press at elections may be over-estimated. Most of the readers of *The Sun*, the most ferociously right-wing paper owned by Murdoch in Britain, voted for the Labour Party in the last election. Similarly, Murdoch's papers in the US

supported Republican George Bush, who lost the American presidential election to Bill Clinton.

A more widespread criticism of Murdoch is that the editors of his popular newspapers fill their pages with sex and crime. In the book, the editors reply, again, that had the papers been run by others, the same formulae would have been employed to make them popular. In other words, they merely fulfil a social demand, they don't create one. This has to remain a matter of dispute.

Shawcross's book pays full attention to such issues, and levels his own criticism at Murdoch. In particular, he worries that Murdoch is planning to transmit American programmes from satellites in space to Asia and Africa, as he does in Europe today, without first seeking the permission of a majority of the inhabitants of those continents. "Are people really being offered more choice than before?", Shawcross asks. "The phenomenon is so new that such questions cannot all yet be answered. But they need to be asked."

He concludes with a look back at some of the figures through history who have wielded similar power: "Press barons like Lord Northcliffe, William Randolph Hearst and Lord Beaverbrook, used to affect the views and policies of nations. Murdoch and a handful of others are now reaching and touching the lives of billions of people all over the world. They are building the foundations of the twenty-first century, the information age. Their power is awesome, and the responsibility is immense".

Despite the author's need to explain the financial deals and the monetary policies that consume most of Murdoch's time, William Shawcross has managed, as always, to produce a highly-readable book. I've watched the changes Murdoch has imposed on his British newspapers at close quarters, and I don't doubt Shawcross's objectivity. Above all, the author has written an important book, given that Rupert Murdoch, whether we like it or not, is a significant phenomenon of our time. We owe it to ourselves to know him better.

ground in respect of certain international political images. The reporting of the Gulf war, for instance, in terms of news and visual coverage will remain a matter of debate for a long time; the CNN could not easily extricate itself from the charge that it 'merchandized' its horrors and destruction without the benefit of inducing an anti-war attitude in its American audience. In the same way, its detailed coverage of the demolition of the Babri mosque and its cruel consequences raised important questions about 'surfeit coverage' and the 'limits' of information. Again, the CNN's showing of President Clinton's glittering inauguration was marred for many viewers because his jingo declaration about his resolve to use force whenever necessary to protect American interests, went uninterrogated by any journalist on its screen.

Then there are subjects like the question of lifting the ban on homo-sexuality in the US Armed Forces which has hit the American cosmos and international television, but how do we here relate to the obsession about a thing like that, except as a marginal matter of anthropological interest?

There are other questions in this context: who are the radio and television journalists responsible to? Their capacity for doing good, adequately matched by their capacity for doing mischief or damage through ignorance or error, is fairly limitless. And when it comes to reporting about a particular country or a region which is not his own, what is the reporter's equipment? Does he have a reliable knowledge of the languages, history, and culture of the people he reports about? Does he understand especially the nuances of both their visible and invisible lives? The questions have to be addressed in earnest.

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