

Freedom's not in a satellite dish



BBC World Television was dumped by Saudi Arabia last week. JOHN TUSA, one of its founders, asks whether the hopes that satellite TV would destroy censorship were not premature

HOW quickly the bloom has gone from the seemingly brilliant surface of international satellite news broadcasting.

Less than 30 months ago, flushed with triumph at his coup in buying Asiasat and Star TV from a Hong Kong entrepreneur, Rupert Murdoch's satellite footprints encompassed the whole of China to the north, and the whole of South Asia and the Middle East to the south.

He used a confident speech to proclaim the benefits that would flow from the new services.

"Advances in the technology of telecommunications have proved an unambiguous threat to totalitarian regimes everywhere," the media colossus didactically declared. "Satellite broadcasting makes it possible for information-hungry residents of many closed societies to bypass state-controlled television channels."

Yet one could equally argue that it was from that point that the commercial priority — the hunt for maximum ratings — came into conflict with the lofty ideal of delivering uncensored news to audiences familiar only with "official" media. As the BBC contemplated the ruins of its now-abandoned link with the Saudi-controlled Orbit company last week, it is hard not to con-

clude that the satellite broadcasters have failed to draw the correct lessons from international radio broadcasters' 60-year experience in delivering genuine news to vast populations who live under censorship.

Within months of his challenge to Asia's authoritarian regimes, Murdoch found that a more pressing consideration was to satisfy their needs as commercial partners. The Malaysian prime minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, was assured that Murdoch's Star TV would provide a service that "governments in the region would find both friendly and useful".

But such affable diplomacy raised the question of whether governments would find the services more friendly than their citizens would find them useful. And nowhere was that question more pertinent than in China, where a vast consumer market lies within the political control of one of the world's most thin-skinned regimes.

Ever since the coverage of the Tiananmen Square "events" of 1989, the Chinese government had jammed BBC World Service radio transmissions in Mandarin. The delivery of BBC World Service TV was seen as an affront to the Peking authorities — as "unfriendly" to the government as it may have been "useful" to Chinese viewers.

If Murdoch was to do deals with China, he had to put commercial needs and the wishes of the host government well before the appetite of audiences for uncensored news. In a historic turnaround, he

dropped BBC World Service from Asiasat's China-directed beam and replaced it not with Sky News but by a movie channel. Commerce came before news values, the bottom line before public service.

Earlier this year, the two international media colossi, Ted Turner and Rupert Murdoch, fell out over this crucial principle. Murdoch accused Turner of "brown-nosing dictators" because of Turner's growing relationship with Cuba's Fidel Castro.

The rupture between Orbit and BBC World Service Television in Arabic demonstrates what is likely to happen to a broadcaster that continues to put the news ahead of political convenience.

Such an attitude in today's hard-bitten commercial world is magnificent but it does not help the bottom line. The acid test for the commercially driven satellite stations is yet to come.

How directly will they report a world crisis from a country — say China — where they have real commercial links? It is one thing to be fearless in Baghdad.

How would a new Tiananmen be reported if it meant putting commercial contracts at risk?

For the BBC, the tensions explicit in the funding of BBC

World Service Television have been starkly exposed by the Orbit affair. They were there from its foundation in 1992, when the then Director General, Sir Michael Checkland, decreed that, since crossover funding for WSTV from either the World Service's Grant-in-Aid or the Domestic Services Licence Fee was banned by the Government, WSTV would have to be "commercial".

In a brilliant manoeuvre, Checkland allowed the cash flow generated by the BBC's European cable contracts to be used as WSTV's core funding, with earnings to be supplemented from regional strategic alliances. The plan worked and allowed WSTV to make its mark in Asia, East Asia and, increasingly, in other key markets.

Those of us involved at the outset knew that such arrangements would always be crafty compromises, involving less-than-perfect commercial and political alliances. The relaunch of the BBC's World Television efforts last year under the title of BBC Worldwide, now committed to gung-ho commercialism, has meant that values and funding have come into head-on conflict. It looks as if the paymasters have won.

There is a price to be paid for transmitting values. We have not yet decided what it is or how it should be paid. But it is surely worth paying and infinitely preferable to — forgive my Australian — "brown-nosing dictators".

John Tusa was managing director of BBC World Service 1986-92 and helped initiate WSTV in 1991.

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