

30 years of PTV:



By Ahmed Salim

Ever since its inception in Pakistan, television as a broadcasting medium has not set for itself any long-term specific policy objectives. Its role and emphasis have been different from time to time subject to the guidelines and goals of the government in power. Instead of playing its part as an instrument of projecting and promoting national and state interests and interests of the people, it has been used by successive governments as a tool for perpetuating or serving their own political interests and objects. This was a natural consequence of the fact that Pakistan Television has been in the past controlled by the government through the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, which in turn has led to a limiting and negative outlook and attitude and has only helped to stultify creativity, growth and objectivity."

So reads a still relevant extract from a policy directive released by the Martial Law government after July 5, 1977.

But it was not always so. In the early days of PTV, there were no policy guidelines. PTV's first newsmen, Zafar Samdani, recalls that decisions about the news were based on merit alone: "We were indifferent to their consequence."

The campaign for the 1965 elections changed things slightly. "We were required to project Ayub Khan far in excess to his weight as a presidential candidate competing with Miss Jinnah. It was the beginning of official control over television," says Samdani, "but we were still more or less independent to decide policy. We would give Ayub Khan 30 to 40 seconds more than Miss Jinnah only because he was the president. In fact, there was no directive from Ayub Khan to that effect, but the bureaucrats took certain decisions they were not supposed to take."

The government took control of television in the form of the Television Promoters Company, but this move did not cause any policy problems at that time. TV officials still received no written orders, only verbal indications.

When Yahya Khan took over power in 1969, his first directive for television was "to avoid over-projection or personalised projection of all members of the administration," including the head of State, his Cabinet, Martial Law authorities, and government officials. The criterion for news coverage was defined as "the intrinsic importance of the news" while routine activities were not to be given "undue prominence". The emphasis in coverage was shifted "from the activities of government officials to reflect the problems and achievements of the people at large".

Government functionaries were no longer to be referred to by name; unless they were being covered in a personal capacity, only their designations were to be mentioned. Detailed news coverage of pre-election activity was to continue. Political coverage in the news, initiated

on Jan 20, 1970, represented a major breakthrough in news policy, and continued according to carefully framed guidelines "in order to ensure impartiality".

Tahya Khan soon started appearing frequently on TV, despite personally taking severe notice of this. Director Programmes Khawaja Shahid Hussain remarked in a note, on January 15, 1970, that in its news coverage of the President, PTV was repeating old mistakes "by subjecting by the President to unnecessary exposure."

He directed that Presidential items were not to be made the main lead, and routine arrivals and departures were not to be covered visually. These instructions also applied to coverage of Ministers and other functionaries.

The 1970 elections were a landmark in the history of Pakistan Television, and it undertook an ambitious project to arrange 35 hours non-stop transmission to convey minute to minute results. It also conducted in-depth interviews of the leaders of various political parties before the general elections.

"This was PTV's golden phase", says former Managing Director Roedad Khan, "this medium never enjoyed such freedom again. The situation changed, the life of the country's eastern arm was literally paralysed, so the government withdrew our liberties."

Less than a year after the 1970 elections came what Zubair Ali calls PTV's "biggest failure": the traumatic events of 1971 and the disastrous war with India. While Pakistan was losing the battle on almost all fronts, the information provided to the people painted a very different picture, with viewers told that all was well until December 14. On December 15, they were suddenly informed that all was lost. This was the darkest hour of all news media, and PTV shared it in equal measure.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government released fresh directives which reflect its awareness and sensitivity to the effectiveness of television:

"...Television should not be permitted to appear as a part of government, projecting only one-sided view of government policy. Autonomy in News and Current Affairs programming will enable people to develop a new faith in the mass media, to ventilate their frustration and resentment". The only restriction imposed was that "one-sided distorted projection of views will not be permitted. A traditional of factual and objective reporting should be established. If the above guiding principles are accepted, the important democratic distinction between the state and the government of the day will be established, and the medium can also be used effectively for positive nation ends."

Over-projection of the President was to be avoided. Bhutto further directed that "unless a Minister has some historic and breathtaking news to reveal, he should be told that television is basically meant for entertainment and education and not for personal projection".

When in 1973, Bhutto's book 'Politics of People' was published, he commented

on its publicity: "Please do not over-publicise like 'Friends not Masters'."

Secretary Information, Nasim Ahmad noted: "Under the direction of former Information Secretary, Mr Ataf Gauhara, excessive publicity for Field Marshal Ayub Khan's book 'Friends not Masters' was arranged. That publicity campaign, like the subsequent 'Decade of Reforms' publicity campaign launched by Mr Ataf Gauhara, proved extremely counter productive. Time and time we have urged our officers and concerned agencies to avoid 'Durbari' publicity of this kind. Old habits die hard, however, and they continue to indulge in old practices... Due care must be taken to ensure that there is no over publicity which is detrimental to the Prime Minister and his administration."

The government's awareness to the dangers of over publicity are further reflected in a letter by Yausuf Buch, Special Assistant to Prime Minister for Information, written to former Chief Minister, Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi of Sindh about the publicity for an international seminar, Sindh through the Centuries, stressing that it should not be given too much coverage.

The emerging political situation after the 1977 elections also affected television



The then president Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Maulana Kausar Niazi, Mr Agha Nasir and Aslam Azhar at

news. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting held a meeting to emphasise the improvement of all programmes including news, and issued fresh directives about news policy. News items were now to be left to the Controller News/News Editors on a trial basis for a week, and their results later watched for assessment. More visual treatment to the news was suggested, and national news was to be given priority over international news.

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the directives, which also called for an improvement in the format and presentation of news.

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The "non-partisan stance" of the Martial Law government was to be protected and the army's role projected as "a benign, kind and disciplined force which is always ready to help their brethren in distress. This image should be further built up", stated a directive of July

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A PTV camera unit was put on duty at ISPR, in addition to the availability of PTV unit and PTV centre round the clock. All news items released by Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) "should be covered by PTV in its news bulletins", and "Each and every story concerning CMLA and M.L. Administration should be got cleared from ISPR before release". In fact, the ISPR was to clear all interviews with government functionaries on radio and television before broadcast or telecast. In addition, "Full name of Genera

Policy and politics



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A directive of July 7, 1977 stated: "There is no need to project certain problems being faced by the people due to a variety of reasons including lapses on the part of earlier government/governments". Another directive a week later asked Radio and TV not to cover visits to flood affected areas by political leaders.

The media was also given guidelines to reorient news bulletins and programmes "in accordance with the policy and thinking of the new government". This included the non-participation of students in politics.

A directive of July 9 1977 states: "Exposure of CMLA and M.L. Administration should be balanced without over-playing their activities. If underplayed, it may create an impression among the people that there was no government. On the other hand if overplayed it could make the people think that the M.L. Administration had some political ambitions or that it intended to stay on."

As preparations for general elections gained momentum, directives were issued in reference to the coverage of PNA and PPP leaders. But leftist views were highly prohibited. In the light of the CMLA's

appropriate level of trial, if it is felt that it is of public interest". Coverage was mainly limited to the office bearers of PNA and PPP, the two main contesting parties, but no visual coverage was allowed. After all this, it was directed that "News should be projected professionally".

Four months later a new policy was dictated for News and other programmes, described as "radical changes... in pursuance of the Martial Law Government's policy of freedom of expression".

The directive stated: "Television news in the last four months has become more credible, fair and unbiased. There is greater emphasis now on investigative reporting in social and economic fields not only to highlight the good work being done but also to expose the sore spots of public service, departments, organisations and agencies. Through exclusive reports, television has, for the first time become a source of news which is getting prominent space in national newspapers. In the past three months, seventy-five television stories were picked up by newspapers, which is no mean achievement."

"...Current Affairs Programmes... are more candid, alive and unbiased. New personalities with fresh approach to problems are being introduced..."

After three years of Martial Law, in the 49th meeting of the Board, chaired by Major General Mujibur Rehman, important decisions regarding content and form of news programme were made. The Chairman cautioned against "the use of flashy clothes by the lady newscasters" and advised them to be simply dressed and wear "only soft coloured clothes".

On the general pattern of news, he said that a story featuring the President need not always begin with him. In general, the Chairman was "appreciative of the efforts being made to improve the standard of News and Current Affairs programmes."

General Mujibur Rehman, a main initiator of Martial Law policies, reached on the same conclusion as Altaf Gauhar after leaving his post, that the government should liberate the media.

When asked why he did not offer this freedom while he was Information Secretary, he responded, "How could you expect this from me under a Martial Law regime? Even democratic governments have not been able to afford this luxury. Policy making was not my authority."

He added, "A basic mistake of governments is that they think maximum coverage will promote them. I could not explain them after all my sincere efforts that under-publicity always goes in their favour."

With the dissolution of assemblies on May 29, 1988, new policy directives were issued. President Ziaul Haq addressed the Principal Officers of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting on June 5, 1988 and stressed "a balanced projection" of the Head of State. "The programme content of Radio and Television must reflect the Islamic nature and spirit of Pakistan," he said. They were also to assign the "highest priority to the process of Islamisation... Obscenity and nudity

should be stopped over Television" and in this connection, "steps taken to improve the quality of Television commercials and make them more dignified".

Orders were also given for television comedies and announcers to wear Pakistani dress and "be properly attired. Males... should use closed collar shirts".

"The News Organisations of both Radio and Television should be the strongest units in order to provide a better and comprehensive coverage about Pakistan". These media should have their "own correspondents, reporters and stringers in different parts of the country for better coverage" and "improve their programming content for becoming more credible institutions".

After Zia's death and the installation of a democratic government, on December 6, 1988, Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto introduced a new information policy that incorporated coverage of the parliamentary opposition in news bulletins and Current Affairs programmes, for the first time in Pakistan's history.

"All news stories should be handled on the basis of merit" was the message to media bosses. Suddenly, real people and events were focussed upon, rather than routine protocol coverage of the President, Prime Minister, Chief Ministers and various state functionaries. For the first time, prime time coverage included the opposition, attacking the government of the day.

The coming alive of TV news was too good to be true and certainly too good to last. PTV's news broadcasts began to revert to old habits, with routine engagements of those in power taking precedence over real news, although the token slot for the opposition remained.

PTV's most exploited department has undoubtedly been its news section which has constantly been used to project the images of politicians, without consideration for news value. With party propaganda, character assassination of political opponents and glorification of rulers being its hallmarks for the past thirty years, it is little wonder that PTV has almost no credibility.

It is not surprising that the response to *Khabarnama* is sceptical, to say the least. And with more choices available, viewers are switching over to other channels. In a nutshell it can be said that PTV has forced its viewers to acknowledge it as a source of information which is perfect in the "art of not telling the truth".

In its 30 year PTV has added a new element to its news programmes: commercialisation, reportedly the brainchild of Director PTV Programmes Zaman Ali Khan, and aimed at generating more revenue for the Corporation. Thus the already unwilling viewer of *Khabarnama* has to digest four commercial breaks within a span of 30 minutes. A terse comment on this hopeless situation by a fed-up viewer, was that often the commercial messages sound more truthful than the news broadcast.



Kausar Agha and Aslam Azhar at the new Lahore studios. Photos courtesy Ahmed Salim

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briefing, guidelines were given to the Director, News and Current Affairs and Director Programmes Administration, PTV for immediate implementation. According to these guidelines, since people were interested in "political news and statements of various political leaders" (being ignored by PTV's news bulletins) these should be given coverage. "This coverage should however be balanced" and care taken to ensure that office bearers of various political parties "are not unnecessarily built up". News emanating from court cases could be included "at an