

PAKISTAN TELEVISION AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

The News Journal's Media

By Sajid Mansoor Qaisrani

Pakistan Television (PTV), which is the prime television network of the country, is keeping pace with the times. However, while looking at PTV, it should be kept in mind that it is not just an ordinary channel. Besides being a major TV network in the region (since its inception, it has maintained its supremacy over regional networks, drama, music, sports, and other fields of entertainment), it is a national institution of repute and one of the major commercial organisations in the country. It is in this context that PTV's role should be analysed and evaluated.

Operating a channel is not a very difficult thing to do in modern times. By hiring a transponder on satellite or purchasing air time on any terrestrial network, one can become a channel. But obtaining technical know-how of the latest development in the field of communication, acquiring state-of-the-art equipment, training the staff about its use, developing indigenous technology, furnishing information and education besides entertainment, and providing employment to thousands of people, is a colossal task to accomplish. PTV is proud that it is fulfilling this task as a national obligation and entirely from its own resources. All the know-how and trained manpower in the field of television, that is available in the country, today, is because of PTV.

1994 has been particularly a very productive year for PTV. The year marks the beginning of a new phase in the history of television in Pakistan. Earlier, this year, the people at PTV decided to brush off the laziness of the recent past in order to quicken its pace. Many changes were made in the set-up and functioning of PTV during this single year than in any other period in its entire history.

Media managers at PTV were very clear and decisive of what they expected of PTV. And PTV's workers and professionals once again proved that they have the potential and abilities to meet any challenge. PTV's Chairman, Mr Hussain Haqqani says, "I want to see Corporate Culture in the PTV offices and professional atmosphere in its studios."

"PTV has established itself as the best broadcasting organisation of the region", he adds. "Our aim is to turn it into a model broadcasting organisation of the Muslim world. And I am sure that PTV has the potential to lead the Muslim world in the field of broadcasting."

PTV's Managing Director, Mr Farhad Zaidi's success is the result of his dual qualities of being a competent professional as well as a salesman and a marketing person. He knows how to boost the ego of a professional, to get maximum work out of him, and how to market his product.

Mr Zaidi, who put PTV's general channel on satellite in less than three months of taking over as its executive head, says that he plans to start two new channels, one exclusively for sports and the other for regional language programmes.

PTV took a number of major initiatives during 1994. Turning PTV into a satellite channel without any additional costs is the most outstanding achievement. PTV had acquired a satellite channel, couple of years ago, for its educational broadcasts. This channel was being utilised for only 7 hours daily. PTV's general broadcasts were put on satellite in January 1994 without disturbing the educational transmission. In this way, PTV's signal, which in 1993 was available to about 86 per cent people of Pakistan became available not only to everyone within the country but also viewers of about 38 countries which fall in the footprints of AsiaSat.

Satellite transmission has been a colossal success. The step was appreciated by hundreds of thousands of compatriots living in the Middle East, Far East, and other areas of the AsiaSat region. They were hungry for news about home and PTV provided what they desperately needed. PTV receives hundreds of letters from expatriate viewers every week, who are full of praise for PTV's programmes and thanking it for its satellite transmission. There are demands from expatriates living in UK and North America to provide PTV broadcasts to them. PTV's Chairman, Mr Hussain Haqqani, recently told newsmen that the government is looking into the possibilities of providing broadcasts to these viewers via local cable net-

works.

Satellite transmission of PTV has also been a great success in another respect. Kashmiris, who were waging a relentless struggle for their freedom in the occupied territories, had no way to inform the world about their struggle and about the atrocities being committed by the Indian occupying forces in their land. It is here that PTV's bold decision to go on satellite was the biggest success. Kashmiris found a voice through PTV.

PTV transmitted their message through plays like Wisal, Mohasara and Wafa and other news and current affairs programme in such a piercing and convincing way that the Indian government publicly announced steps to curb PTV's viewing in India. In this way, PTV during 1994 attained the status of one of those Pakistani institutions that are most hated and feared by the Indians.

Duration of PTV's transmission progressed from one hour in 1964 to seven hours in 1993. Day long transmission on Saturdays was introduced in July this year and it was put on satellite along with the Daily Morning Transmission from the 1st of September. Under recent decisions, now PTV opens its channel at 0700 hours in morning and transmission on satellite continues without break to late night thereby achieving a 17 hours satellite transmission without any break. PTV also airs parallel transmission on terrestrial microwave network between 1500 and 1800 hours. The duration of its total daily transmission has more than doubled during a single year. PTV is planning to start full day transmission sometime next year.

PTV also plans to start programmes in Arabic. At present modalities are being worked out. The main question being considered is whether to sub-title the programmes in Arabic or dub them. Initially, the Arabic chunk will be of two or three hours duration. PTV is discussing an arrangement with Sharjah Television for dubbing and subtitling of serials.

PTV also plans to enter into joint ventures with friendly countries and SAARC countries in the field of programmes production. It proposes to take the "Tariq Aziz Show" to some other friendly countries besides Sharjah,

where it went earlier this year. Joint ventures with Turkey are already underway.

Till 1993, PTV only aired programmes produced in its own studios and to its own people. But keeping in line with the government's policy of encouraging talent in the private sector, PTV has started purchasing quality private productions for showing to its viewers. Air time is also available for good private productions. This has given rise to healthy competitions between PTV's professional and best talent in the private sector.

Efforts will continue to improve the presentation and programme packaging. In this regard, a permanent computer resource has been established at Islamabad Centre, while a modern post production unit is in the final stages of completion at PTV's Lahore studios.

PTV, at its training academy based in Islamabad, plans to provide training facilities to personnel from Islamic countries and developing nations in various disciplines of television production.

PTV's achievements during the year have been numerous. It produced popular serials like Marvi and Dhooan, and current affairs programmes like Spectrum, and Guest Hour. Besides traditional sports like cricket, hockey and tennis, PTV viewers saw live, almost all the matches of World Cup Football, played in the United States. PTV's first business programme "Pakistan Business Update" has been launched.

But despite all these achievements, PTV's management is still not satisfied. Planning continues for further increasing the transmission hours, improve the quality of programmes and programmes packaging.

Under the supervision of Deputy Managing Director, Mr Suleman, PTV has started compilation of a central catalogue of video film material available at various TV centres. This important step was neglected in the past. It is a gigantic task and a special team has been constituted to identify and categorise the material to prepare a comprehensive catalogue. The Deputy Managing Director is also personally monitoring the efforts for the promotion of PTV's programmes at home and marketing overseas.