

# TV: funded by people, exploited

By Saeed Malik

**A**CKNOWLEDGED the world over as a most powerful force, television influences the minds, emotions and social responses of the people. Social scientists claim that television's role in shaping the lifestyles of the viewers is not only enduring but also profound.

According to some critics, television has metamorphosed into a "modern university without a wall", and has become an effective tool for the transmission of knowledge and richness to the culturally arid zones. This is in addition to its ability to entertain the viewers, enlightening them about the virtues of promoting basic human rights, and democratic, political, cultural, social and educational norms and values. The logo of Pakistan Television Corporation in theory points to these three functions of the medium - education, information and entertainment.

From the technological standpoint, PTV has come a long way since its inception on November 26, 1964, when it was launched from Lahore as a pilot project, designed to test the feasibility of television broadcasting in the country. Over the decades it has grown into an expanded national network, capable of producing a variety of indoor and outdoor programmes, with and without the use of satellite technology.

For a majority of viewers in Pakistan, television should provide entertainment. For them, watching TV is a pastime. For others, it is a formulator of their social, political and cultural agenda, not to forget the interest of others in the daily fluctuations in the indices of stock exchanges. There is, however, a small minority which considers television a time waster, an intruder in their privacy and also an addictive soporific.

For servile bureaucrats in the Ministry of Information (MoI), television as a user of electromagnetic spectrum under federal license, is required to conduct its operations only in "public interest". No precise definition of public interest has ever been given as it has been subjected to a medley of tainted explanations, suiting the whims and fancies of the rulers of all hues and ideological persuasions.

In the opinion of the so-called custodians of "public interest" or morality, the government

should maintain a monopoly over PTV telecasts. Despite tall claims made to the contrary by the government, officials in MoI do not like to give a free hand to the official electronic medium. They try to vigorously enforce the not-too-hidden censor, especially when it comes to pandering to the wishes of the rulers. These officials refuse to be disillusioned of the fantasy that has clouded their imagination and vision about the desirability of making PTV an independent corporation.

Enlightened viewers plead that the government should not get into the business of broadcasting and should not concern itself in any way with the content and character of the telecasts. They argue that PTV should be converted into an independent corporation, free from regulations other than the ones stipulated in its charter. What the country needs, they contend, is a vigorous, free, unrestricted television, if it is to remain in business in this fast-shrinking world, which is currently being subjected to round the clock onslaught by hundreds of TV networks via satellite, so that it can successfully compete with them.

Educators and social scientists recommend that there is a need for special television programmes during prime-time, which are not commercial, implying thereby that no commercial spots should be sold to advertisers during that chunk of time. They believe it to be essential because it will be a right step in the direction of achieving PTV's avowed objectives — education, purposive entertainment and up-to-date information about what is happening in this region, in particular, and in the world, in general.

During the past 36 years, PTV has grown into a mature institution. However, the mood within the medium becomes upbeat only during the tenures of caretaker governments. There seems to be a tendency to focus on its (PTV's) achievements during its annual birthday programmes, some of which doubtless are genuine, and not took at the warts, which are also many. Glib-tongue recitations of kudos showered on PTV by the reviewers, especially in the domain of tele-drama, are often rubbed in much to the chagrin of the viewers. Unquestionably, there is a

justified pride in the way PTV has handled its technical side and expertly used the technology available to it, including going satellite in recent years. This has enabled the viewers in about 40 countries to watch PTV telecasts.

The quality of entertainment in PTV telecasts has plummeted in recent years, especially in the decade of the 1990s. The propaganda unleashed by the (PML and PPP) governments was substituted for hard news, and heavy-handed sermons replaced lively discussions on current issues. At the same time, revolting soap operas, shot on foreign locations, were juxtaposed on slots reserved for entertaining plays, which had strong social comments.

The decision by the government to set up TV broadcasting centres in the country in 1964 was hailed (at that time), for the

is that the late dictator allowed TV some freedom in the beginning, but later turned it into a handmaiden of his unrepresentative government. With its gradual progression towards maturity, and its managers acquiring enough expertise, PTV began to surrender its freedom to the partisan designs of the rulers of all kinds — military dictators, pseudo socialists, Islamists and the protagonists of the free market economy.

The impact of sycophantic behaviour of PTV officialdom was starkly manifest in its news and views presentations and current affairs programmes, a reality which the PTV top brass was generally reluctant to admit. Consequently, the credibility of the official electronic medium suffered, and the viewers refused to believe in what PTV news bulletins churned out daily, especially about political

*Television screens are like newspapers, and government has no more right to concern itself with what is telecast than it has the right to concern itself with what is printed. Also, television channels in the private sector, when allowed to operate, should be under official control so that they could manage their own affairs. Some viewers go to the extent of accusing television of perpetuating a number of evils such as rise in juvenile delinquency, decay of educational standards, weakening of critical abilities, and the good from the mediocre are cited as evidence to substantiate their arguments*

Pakistanis were provided the luxury of watching programmes on the miniscreen much before the rest of the Third World countries (including India) thought of it. It was regarded as a sign of economic progress, which was overblown during the "Decade of Development", celebrated by Ayub Khan with much misplaced euphoria.

Before TV programmes started mounting airwaves, Ayub had gagged the press, had the radio sung praises for him. He wanted the tube to focus on his epaulettes. Due to the limitation of technology, PTV's reach did not cover as much populace as it does now. The irony of the fate

events taking place in the country. As a government controlled medium, PTV surrendered its prerogatives to truthfully reflect ground realities and instead chose to project only the partisan policies of the rulers.

Television screens are like newspapers, and the government has no more right to concern itself with what is telecast than it has the right to interfere in what is printed. Also, television channels in the private sector, when allowed to operate, should be free of official control so that they could manage their own affairs.

Some viewers go to the extent of accusing television of perpet-

# ited by rulers

Press  
Mass Comm

Dawin  
11/11/00

ating a number of social ills. The rise in juvenile delinquency, decay of ethical and moral standards, weakening of critical abilities to distinguish the good in artistic and aesthetic sphere from the mediocre, encouragement of conformity, and economic, political and cultural exploitation are cited as examples to substantiate their arguments.

Defenders of the official electronic medium, on the other hand, assert that PTV programmes help in clearing the hazy maze from viewers' perceptions about various issues, and give a boost to cultural activities, which cause and increase in the overall national creative output. They also assert that TV updates viewers' knowledge of current national and international affairs. Some of them even claim that television promotes increased social interac-

Pakistan's raison d'être, and also about national and international issues, after watching countless PTV telecasts?

Pakistan Television Corporation was set up with the taxpayers' money. However, it has been and continues to be exploited by the rulers to glorify their own so-called achievements and what they have done for the country and the poor people of this impoverished nation, in which the rich have arrogated to themselves the right to rule, without a system of checks and balances.

The official electronic medium has patronized a class of "professional" intellectuals who have no convictions or commitments of their own. They make their services available to rulers of all hues and colours to sing praises for them, parroting their "successes" in economic, industrial and scientific domains. The frequency with which they appear on the miniscreen has created a big dent in the credibility of the medium. This class of flatterers should be discouraged and new experts should be given a chance to offer their comments in an objective and independent manner. This will help in restoring the credibility of PTV to some extent. The sooner it is done, the better it will be for the government and the government controlled electronic medium.

Like other government departments, PTV too has, in recent months, re-employed a number of superannuated persons on the basis of their "past experiences". This undesirable practice should be discontinued forthwith as it infringes on the rights of other employees and blocks their chances for upward kick-up in the hierarchy. No one is indispensable, and one has to retire from active service after completing a regular term. They younger members of the team should be trusted and given higher and responsible assignments so that they can prove their mettle. Also, nepotism has become the vogue at PTV Centres. This scourge should be eliminated so that heart burning caused among other employees or up-and-coming artists by influential senior employees of PTV can be remedied. These measures are essential to get better results from the manpower resources of the official electronic medium. ■

*and the  
ern itself with  
to interfere in  
nels in the private  
d be free of  
nage their own  
of accusing  
of social ills. The  
ethical and moral  
ties to distinguish  
as examples to*

tion among the people as well.

However, millions of viewers in Pakistan are seemingly dissatisfied with PTV's creative outputs and the following questions continue to agitate their minds: Has PTV achieved some or all of its stated objectives? Has it done enough to inform or enlighten the viewers about a plethora of national problems? What is the quantum of its contributions to fostering cultural and linguistic integration in the country, which, whether we like it or not, seems divided along linguistic, ethnic and regional lines? Have the viewers become more knowledgeable about the ideological dimensions of