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THE IMPACT OF THE CHANGING MEDIA ENVIRONMENT ON PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING IN ASIA

Panel Discussion

Policy and Regulatory Framework
Governing Public Service Broadcasting

By

H. M. Akram
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Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a privilege and a great pleasure to speak at this forum and to have an opportunity to exchange views with eminent media analysts and policy makers from Asia. I thank you for providing me an opportunity to give a presentation on "Policy and Regulatory Framework Governing Public Service Broadcasting in Pakistan". In this age of information revolution and instantaneous global communication the subject of this seminar presents a most welcome opportunity to the media managers and policy makers engaged in public service broadcasting to share experiences and ideas about the new exciting challenges and opportunities offered by the changing media environment. I must congratulate the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre for holding a seminar on such an interesting subject of immediate relevance.

Demolition of traditional regulatory controls on dissemination of information, at individual, familial, and societal levels, coupled with commercialisation and privatisation of the air waves has posed new challenges to public broadcasting. The situation calls for new responses at policy levels to maintain, even improve public service programming. It will be my endeavour to explain the nature and dimensions of the changes in the media environment which directly or indirectly affect public service broadcasting, and how we in Pakistan are trying to cope with them at policy level.

With the globalization of mass communication the task of informing and educating the public at large has come to be shared by the mass media with traditional institutions of socialization, education, and training. While performing their traditional role, the family, the school, and the pulpit, necessarily have to take into account the media messages and their impact on the members of society. With their global reach in dissemination of ideas, and their tremendous power to influence socio-cultural norms and behaviour, the mass media have acquired a social standing which rivals—some apprehend might even supersede—the role of traditional institutions.

Thus, the mass media share the responsibility with other organs of the state and institutions of society of maintaining and strengthening socio-political and economic structures, and have become an effective instrument of national policies. This importance has brought in its wake new responsibilities for public service broadcasting.

The rationale behind public service broadcasting is the common desire and need among human groups to be informed immediately and correctly. This desire and need is met through public service broadcasting which include news, commentaries, special reports, discussions, documentaries, cultural and religious broadcasts and programmes of interest and utility for women, children, youth and other special groups. Farm programmes, school broadcasts, public service spots, utility announcements, health tips and the like are integral part of public service broadcasting. They are aimed at serving the collective interests of the society, and are so designed as to build an
enlightened and well informed public opinion. Being in the public service their primary concern is not commercial gain.

While public service broadcasting is faced with a new situation today, when privatisation and deregulation are order of the day, it does not necessarily mean that it is facing a threat. News, current affairs, educational and informational programmes, and cultural documentaries are and shall remain in demand for their intrinsic value, if not for anything else. Who can deny that news bulletins have one of the largest viewership.

Who doesn't know that some of the current affair shows attract more audience than any entertainment programme. This explains why even today private broadcasting organisations often find it commercially desirable to broadcast programmes which have been traditionally treated as public service. Over the years public service broadcasting has incubated a strong desire and taste among the audience for informative and educational programmes. Some of the relatively, new trends in public thinking have further reinforced this taste. These include health consciousness and environmental awareness. That is why we see that today every medium of broadcasting, public or private, finds it necessary to give health and dietary tips and speak of environmental concerns. Even commercial advertisers find it more rewarding to appeal to the audience viewers with reference to health and ecology.

Deregulation and privatisation of the air waves should, therefore, be viewed as an extension and a new dimension of broadcasting which offers greater choice and new opportunities to the public, as also to public service broadcasters. Viewed in this perspective, competition with private broadcasting, direct broadcast satellites, and cable networks should, in fact, help improve the quality of public service programmes and strengthen them in many ways. I must hasten to add that for this to come about, media managers and policy makers engaged in public service broadcasting will have to break new ground, be more imaginative, and show greater initiative. While they must not lose sight of their primary objective, they must at the same time experiment with new ways to reach the objective through better programming techniques, more interesting formats and stronger production values. Now the question is: how to maintain and improve public service broadcast without succumbing to the temptation of increasing commercialisation of the air waves? I shall try to explain the implications of this dilemma, and how we are coping with it in Pakistan.

BACKGROUND AND CURRENT STATUS

The significance of electronic media was not lost on the founding fathers of Pakistan. Steps were taken in right earnest to introduce and improve the public service broadcasting and to harness its potential in nation building activities, right from the inception of the state. As a result today Pakistan has a well founded broadcasting
network, which covers almost the entire area and population of the country. Both Radio and Television are on satellite and their signals are received in 38 countries.

Radio Pakistan

Radio Pakistan has been broadcasting public service programmes since 14th August 1947, when it came into being with the birth of the new state. To begin with there were only two broadcasting stations, one at Lahore and the other at Peshawar, which transmitted programmes on low power 5 K.W. and 10 K.W. transmitters respectively. They covered only 4.3% of the territory and 6.7% of the population.

Radio Pakistan was originally a government department. It was converted to a Statutory Corporation and renamed "Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation" on 20th December 1972. The number of radio stations in the country has now risen to twenty one. PBC's medium wave coverage population-wise is today 95 percent and area-wise 97 percent. While shortwave coverage within the country is 100 percent, area-wise as well as population-wise. Commercially sponsored programmes and advertisements are accommodated and a code for commercial advertising exists which defines the contents and products about which advertising is permitted.

Communication revolution brought about by the introduction of transistor made radio available to almost every segment of society. Radio in Pakistan, however, continued for a long time with studio-oriented broadcasting in a frame which was not effectively linked up with the issues and problems of current relevance. This was to change in January 1987, when Radio Pakistan brought about a major shift in its communication strategy and presentation of programmes. The shift aimed at bringing presentation in line with broadcasting in the advanced societies where "communication explosion" had already swept the old pattern away. The new approach is life related, indirectly motivational and aimed at inciting a sense of pride in the national achievements with the ultimate objective of developing an Islamic welfare society. This major reorientation of broadcasting brought about a sharper focus on life-related subjects and current affairs. Today Radio Pakistan, in its role as Pakistan's major national institution of public service broadcasting, has the responsibility of preserving, propagating and popularising the best in state and society. The purview of Radio Pakistan in this context includes propagation of national consensus, evolving of thought processes and reinforcing the norms of social behaviour.

Radio Pakistan uses as many as eighteen languages in home services, in addition to national language Urdu, and widely used English language. In its External Service, Radio Pakistan broadcasts in fifteen languages. This provides radio with an ability to speak to the target audience in their own language and idiom. Literacy rate in Pakistan being only 36%, it is necessary that emphasis be laid on regional languages which are widely spoken by the masses. In this respect Radio Pakistan is playing an
important public service role by promoting regional languages and strengthening national outlook through the contents of its programmes.

The canvas of Radio Pakistan is as wide and varied as the country itself. Radio Pakistan being the largest and the fastest mass medium in the country is entrusted, on the one hand, with the task of informing and educating people about Government policies and important happenings and outside the country. Public service programmes range from basic education to religious instructions, from science courses to civic sense, from lessons in health and hygiene to those in cooking, from special programmes for farmers to those for industrial workers, from training in traffic laws to that in vocational trades, from tree plantation techniques to methods of domestic waste disposal, from house keeping to women’s rights. In short our public service broadcasts cover the whole gamut of socio-political and cultural issues.

Both Radio and TV have their own Training Academies to provide professional knowledge and on-job expertise to their personnel. These academies organize special courses on public service and nation building programmes. They cater to the needs of sister organizations of the region, and coordinate training activities with the regional training institutions like Asia Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development.

Pakistan Television

Pakistan Television started as a pilot TV station on 26 November 1961 from Lahore. Its objectives as outlined in its charter were to educate, inform, and entertain the people. Accordingly Pakistan Television has been engaged in the promotion of Pakistani culture and historical heritage, informing the public about world affairs, and guiding them to progress.

On completion of the experimental phase a private limited company called Television Promoters Limited, was set up in 1965. This company was later converted into Pakistan Television Corporation in 1967.

PTV quickly gained professional expertise to become an established TV network recognised as one of the leading organizations in South & South East Asia. With five programme originating centres, one each in the four provincial capitals, and one at the Federal capital in Islamabad, and 36 booster stations PTV covers 87 percent of the population and 37 percent of the area on channel 1 and 57 percent population and 21 percent area on the channel-2. The Telephone and Telegraph Department has established a microwave link connecting all the five centres and rebroadcasting stations to form a PTV network. The average transmission time including morning transmission, which commenced on 16 January 1988, is around 16 hours daily.

News, current affairs, drama, music, sports and religious programmes take the
major share of the daily TV programme schedule. In the last six months PTV devoted 261 broadcast hours to entertainment programmes, and 233 broadcast hours to religious and educational programmes. Informative and news programmes are in addition to this. Imported canned programmes along with children's and regional language programmes are also given their due share. PTV also exports its selected programmes abroad on commercial basis. Regular supply of news and films to foreign syndicates is also arranged. Events of international and national importance are transmitted through daily satellite feeds.

PTV provides commercial time to its advertisers through spot booking of various durations, including mid-breaks during locally produced and imported programmes. Presently more than 200 advertising agencies are registered with PTV. The second channel of PTV is exclusively devoted to education. Both channels are available on Satellite.

Shalimar TV Network (STN)

In 1989 Government of Pakistan granted permission to establish first TV network in the private sector. This was subsequently merged with Shalimar Recording Company. At present the network broadcasts on a division of Shalimar Recording Company under the call sign of STN i.e. Shalimar Television Network.

The network is run on purely commercial basis. It telecasts round the clock. However, air time for prime time broadcasting has been leased to a private company—NTM. All programmes during prime time transmission are indigenous. In the remaining hours it relays CNN and BBC World Service directly received via satellite. STN has now 10 transmitting stations operating in major cities of Pakistan. The network is gradually expanding its coverage area.

The Government of Pakistan while permitting private broadcast to STN stipulated that the network would telecast a certain percentage of time to public service programmes. Thus, despite being a commercial enterprise STN regularly broadcasts programmes on news and current affairs, health, education, and social issues.

POLICIES AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

Policy and Regulatory Framework for Radio and Television is derived from the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan which guarantees freedom of expression within the framework of state laws. National interests, state policies, cultural moorings, social values and religion, determine policy parameters for public service broadcasting in Pakistan.

Both Radio and Television are in public sector and are corporations under the administrative control of Federal Ministry of Information & Broadcasting. Chairman of
the Boards of Directors of both PBC and PTV is the Secretary of the Ministry. The
general programme direction and administration of the PBC and PTV are vested in the
Boards of Directors.

Director General PBC and Managing Director PTV are appointed by the
Government. The two corporations have their charters in the forms of Acts which
provide guidelines for their operational, financial and administrative structures. Secretary
Ministry of Information and Broadcasting is also Chairman, Shalimar Recording
Company. Affairs of the company are managed through a board of directors. This set
up ensures coordination between the public and private broadcasting systems.

PBC and PTV are governed by Parliamentary Act and Companies Act of the
Government of Pakistan. They are also subject to Post and Telegraphy Act as far as
their frequencies are concerned. Both abide by the rules and regulations of and the
frequencies allotted to them by ITU. The Parliament has two Standing Committees
which keep a watch on the performance of PBC and PTV.

According to the PBC Act, Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation is required to
provide broadcasting services for the purpose of disseminating information and education
in general sense and entertainment through programmes which maintain a proper
balance between the contents and high standard of presentation. Besides, the
Corporation is also required to broadcast programmes which may promote Islamic
Ideology, national unity, principles of democracy, freedom, equality, tolerance and social
justice as enunciated by Islam, and discourage parochial, racial, tribal, sectarian,
linguistic and provincial prejudices.

FUTURE PROSPECTS:

Public Broadcasting in Pakistan as everywhere else in the world is facing
problems and challenges which come from competition with private sector within the
country, and satellite broadcasts from abroad. While the challenge from external
broadcasting is more complex and problematic, the one from within the country cannot
also be discounted, though its proportions are, as of now, limited.

Though commercial interests dictate the broadcast policies of domestic private
channels, they do promote broad national consensus, and by and large avoid open
conflict with the accepted norms. After all, private broadcasters are men of the same
socio-cultural background as public service broadcasters. They share the same values,
governed by the same laws, have received more or less the same education, and
have similar prejudices and biases. Short of total break down of the given socio-political
system, the chances of open conflict between the two are relatively less.

The challenge from domestic sources can be successfully met if the government
allocates more resources to public broadcasting and public broadcasting managers show greater initiative, keep themselves abreast of the latest trends and technology, have greater autonomy to adjust with the demand of an easy-to-shift audience.

External channels, particularly the global ones, are neither concerned with national consensus nor bothered about local cultural sensitivities. Foreign broadcasts mostly originate from the developed world which create an imbalance in the flow of information between the rich and the poor countries. This imbalance creates distorted and biased images. Onslaught of the media images and messages originating from a far-off land which for most viewers, exists only on the TV screen, is creating problems which are yet to be comprehended and analyzed. The unwary viewer and the professional media analyst are equally dazed with the glamour and temptation of the foreign media. Despite the conflict of values and incomprehension of the alien messages its attraction remains irresistible.

Apart from sheer attraction of the novel medium the Western broadcasters have the tremendous advantage of technology and resources. On none of these counts, public broadcasting of Asia comes any close to them.

In this perspective of dual challenge from within and without, public service broadcast has a special responsibility. Public broadcasting needs greater and sustained support from the governments specially in the third world countries. We have a reason to be apprehensive that new media channels such as direct broadcast satellites, cables and interactive may seriously weaken and overshadow public service broadcasting. But there is no reason to be pessimistic.

Our experience in Pakistan shows that public service broadcasting can continue to attract the people provided it is willing to adjust its sails according to the changing winds. Even today, PTV has a much larger viewership than its private sector competitors - domestic or foreign. We all know that most of the public service broadcasting organizations of the world - for example BBC and VOA - have survived the onslaught of satellite broadcasts, and mushrooming of private channels. No doubt public service broadcasting are faced with challenges and problems, yet they have in-built capacity to survive albeit with support of governments, coupled with effective marketing of their products at commercial level.

With the introduction of STN as a private TV channel, PTV suffered in finances and viewership for sometime, but with the passage of time it has regained its hold on the market. So far as Radio is concerned there is no serious challenge at the moment. Efforts are afoot to further improve the quality of broadcasts to commercialise the services. Plans have also been made to expand the Radio network by establishing more radio stations with the latest facilities and equipment.
To begin with PTV was hundred percent state financed. But since 1991-92
government subsidy has been withdrawn completely. It has been made possible because
potential of the capital and consumer market has greatly increased and there is also
greater awareness of the effectiveness of TV messages in sales promotion. PTV has
become self-sufficient in finances without letting its programmes be subservient to
commercial and business interests. PTV produces dramas and musical programmes and
then shows them to potential sponsors, who offer to pay according to the expected
popularity and timing of the programme. Prime time news and entertainment
programmes attract the largest number of advertisements and sponsors, not matched by
the local private TV channel.

PTV-2, which is devoted solely to text book education and is targeted at
specialised audience, does not attract commercials and sponsorships. Income generated
by PTV-1 is, however, enough to finance public service programmes on PTV-2. PTV
has thus proven that by blending public service and entertainment programmes, it is
possible to finance those public service programmes which are essential but not
commercially viable. It has also proved that by multiplying broadcasting channels it is
easy to finance an exclusive public service channel out of the earnings of another
channel.

Mr. Chairman, delegates, ladies and gentlemen in conclusion I would like to
submit that we in Pakistan are encouraged to believe that public service broadcast are
not faced with a doomsday scenario. True that its present is a testing time but it does
have a future. We repose confidence in the human nature which has refused to reduce
itself to a mere consumer of goods. We also repose confidence in the intrinsic value of
public broadcasting and its abiding attraction for the people at large. However, we
believe that there is need for better coordination among all countries, especially the
developing countries, to keep public broadcasting at its rightful place. They should
share their experiences and work in closer cooperation to be able to enter the next
century with confidence in the future of public service broadcasting. If the challenge to
public service broadcasting is a collective challenge - as it certainly is - our response
must also be a collective one. After all, we owe it to our peoples to provide them
information, education, and entertainment. We must strive together to ensure that we
do not disappoint them.

Endnotes

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