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Satellite Communications And Culture In Asia

By

Douglas Gautier
I Introduction

- It's a pleasure to be invited here this morning. STAR is a pioneer in the development of satellite broadcasting technology in Asia; I'm flattered to see the interest so many of you have expressed in what we are doing.

- I'd like to begin by sharing with you some of the programming and technical milestones STAR Television has achieved during the past year or so. These developments illustrate the radical strategy "re-think" we have undertaken since News Corporation acquired control of STAR two years ago. They will also demonstrate why digital broadcasting technology is vital to our expansion plans.

- I'd then like to briefly explain how, as our service becomes more and more localised, STAR Television's programming will be even better able to serve the myriad different countries we reach. STAR has always tried to accommodate prevailing tastes and sensitivities; as we move into digital broadcasting we will have more scope than ever before to do that.

- Finally, I'll conclude by outlining how we see our service evolving, the benefits this will bring to all our viewers.

- Of course, I'll then be pleased to try to answer any questions you have about STAR TV.
II Recent achievements

- We've achieved so much over the past 12 to 18 months that when I sat down to put this presentation together I hardly knew where to begin.

- Considering the fact that we are in Jakarta this morning, however, and because we recently established our Southeast Asian headquarters here, I thought it appropriate to concentrate on this region.

- First, though, please allow me to back up for a minute and give you some historical information, as it puts much of what I would like to discuss in context.

- Until just over a year ago, STAR Television was broadcasting five "free-to-air" channels. Those five services looked much the same as they had in December of 1991 when STAR TV went on air - they certainly sounded the same!

- For at that point, four of those five channels were in English: the sports channel; music channel; news and general entertainment channels. Only the STAR Chinese Channel was in Mandarin.

- The other important thing to remember is that until late last spring, no matter where our viewers lived - be it Beirut, Beijing, Bombay, Bangkok or Bali - they were watching the same programmes.

- In the six months following News Corp's acquisition of STAR TV we had to make a number of radical decisions about how to move the network forward. And the first decision we made was that broadcasting one stream of programming to 53 different countries did not make sense.

- We had to grow the service and evolve the programming so that what appears on STAR TV is relevant to viewers wherever they are in Asia - and that means "going local" ...

  - observing the local language, recognising the local culture, local sensitivities and local market conditions.

  - people want to watch television shows in their own languages that reflect circumstances they can "identify" with or "relate" to.
III  How we're doing this

- To do this, we needed to do a number of things. On the business side we needed to supplement our free television channels with pay TV services. This has already begun.

- Perhaps our most "tangible" initiative for Southeast Asia to date has been the launch of a special service from the Palapa B2P satellite. In March of this year STAR introduced this "hybrid" entertainment channel, which provides a combination of movies, sports, and a version of our Channel [V] music service crafted especially for Southeast Asia.

- But we realised it wasn't enough to create regionally-specific and customised programming, we also had to deliver it. And to do this we had to exploit the new developments in satellite broadcasting technology. This would see the STAR television network evolve into a multi-channel service.

 [show the AsiaSat 1 northern beam slide NO 3]

  - Our first effort was "splitting" our satellite transmission beam. This began last April with Prime Sports and our STAR Movies channel. We can now send one stream of programming to audiences in Greater China ...

 [show the southern beam footprint slide NO 4]

  ...and another to our viewers in southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East.

  - Our next step was getting out of the old, limiting technology of analogue broadcasting and into the future of digital as quickly as possible.

 [show the AsiaSat 2 footprint slide NO 5]

  - The digital revolution is about to happen ... it will be born in Asia, and STAR TV will launch it from Hong Kong.

  - Later this year, we will begin broadcasting from our new satellite, AsiaSat 2. Digital compression technology will enable us to deliver a multi-channel service that satisfies - as best as we can - every possible viewing demand.
I'd like to show you a video tape just now that demonstrates the concept of digital broadcasting far better than I can through words alone. It is a News Corporation video that is about 18 months old now ... some of its images are out of date, such as the reference to the company's holding in Hong Kong's South China Morning Post, for example. Also, while the context is very much tailored to the North American and European scenario the principles remain the same and I think it captures the key points admirably. Could we roll that tape, please?

[roll tape "...to a digital age" runs 09.30]

No one knows how much a part of our daily lives what you have just seen will become ... that is up to consumers. That video represents a glimpse of what might be. But I can assure you the technology exists now. And no other company in Asia is exploring the potential of digital anywhere near as aggressively as STAR TV.

IV Choice

- With that very graphic demonstration of what digital compression means, I'd like to pick up on my earlier theme of choice.

- Through AsiaSat 2 and its digital capabilities, we will be able to "target" services. No matter where a cable operator or viewer resides within the STAR TV footprint, the customer can "customise" the package of services he or she wishes to take. From the start there will be at least 15 to 20 channels to choose from in each of our major markets.

- This is important because of the unique environment in which STAR Television operates:

[show the AsiaSat 2 footprint slide NO 6]

- As a trans-national broadcaster, we are faced with often conflicting sensitivities and codes of broadcasting. We reach 53 different countries! And many of these contain numerous societies with unique cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious characteristics.

- How do we even begin to satisfy all of them?
First, let's look at the external regulatory forces that affect our operations:

• STAR TV is regulated in Hong Kong under codes of broadcasting practice that are transparent, well-policed and well respected throughout the footprint.

• Our licence requires us to be at all times responsible for ensuring that the programmes aired on STAR TV are of a high standard and that the material shown is of ordinarily accepted good taste, decency and common sense.

• To meet these requirements, we have always followed a practical course of self regulation and we have a large and active Standards & Practices Department which acts "gatekeeper" for the programmes and advertisements transmitted by STAR TV.

• All STAR TV's transmission material must be sent to our Standards & Practices Department for preview before it goes to air.

- The officers ensure all programmes and advertisements comply with Government-set standards and regulations. Violence, bad language, drug addiction, use of alcohol and cigarettes, sex and nudity are among the fundamental matters they look for.

- At the same time, they pay attention to issues of religious, cultural and political sensitivity in territories within the footprint of STAR TV. The officers instruct editors to delete material considered unacceptable.

• STAR TV's licence also calls for us to pay special attention to sensitivities and standards within territories covered by our service:

They maintain close ties with regional government and statutory bodies to discuss matters relating to regulations, codes of practice, viewers' complaints and their opinions.

• The efforts of our Standards & Practices Department are supported by information released to publicise STAR TV programmes:

- STAR provides sufficient advance information, both on screen and in promotional materials/programme schedules that are sent to newspapers and magazines, to give viewers a very good idea of what kind of programme is appearing on STAR TV at all times.
-This is especially true for films appearing on STAR Movies, each of which is given a film classification rating. This information will allow viewers to make an informed choice as to whether or not they wish to watch.

- As invited guests into people's homes, we have a duty of care and respect to our audience - a responsibility STAR TV takes very seriously.

- If a broadcaster abuses that trust, and shows programmes that offend, it will quickly go out of business.

- If any of you are particularly interested in the principles guiding our self-regulating process I have a few copies of our broadcasting guidelines with me today.

VI Why we expect STAR to be an increasingly "welcome guest"

- We've been speaking about official efforts to ensure acceptability of STAR TV's service. But the most effective regulatory instrument is you, the viewer ... because you have the ultimate control in your hand - the on/off switch on your television.

- The force of consumer choice is even more powerful for a subscription-based television network such as the one STAR is creating. If we don't offer viewers what they want they won't pay us!

- This is a major reason why our programming is emanating more and more from the areas it will be delivered

- Hong Kong will continue to be STAR Television's headquarters. However, head office is not a central point that doesn't connect to the regions. Hong Kong will offer the guiding philosophy. But wherever possible, decisions and activity will take place as close as possible to the places those actions affect. We're devolving more and more management responsibility and programme generating activities to our regional offices and partners.
Examples of our move towards this end abound:

- in India, we have complete facilities for all STAR TV activities in the country: specifically - production, pay-TV marketing and distribution, subscriber management and customer service, programme publicity, advertising sales, pay TV marketing and distribution, and administrative support. The people making the decisions about which programming and services go to India are based there - on the ground and able to respond quickly to the demands of our viewers.

- STAR TV operations for Taiwan the Middle East (centred in Dubai) and our newly-established headquarters for Southeast Asia (centred in Jakarta) are structured similarly.

- Wherever we enter into co-production agreements for new Asia-language material, we devolve as much creative input as possible to our local partners. In the case of the Philippines, for example, we recently announced plans to create a Filipino movie channel with Viva Films - one of the country's leading production houses. Our joint-venture agreement calls for STAR to invest in the creation of scores of new titles each year with the Viva Group. But our local partner will have creative control and determine how we can ensure the channel is as appealing as possible for our Filipino viewers.

- Other examples include our ZEE Cinema, ZEE-TV and EL-TV channels in India, and the hours of Hindi-language material we transmit daily on Channel [V]. In all of these cases, our local partners or locally-based production teams provide the driving creative force.

VII Questions & Answers

- Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your kind attention and your invitation to make this presentation today.

- I will now do my best to answer any questions you might have.