

Rising Star: PAN-Asian TV

A satellite television service with coverage across 42 countries, from Egypt, Cyprus, Turkey to Russia and Japan, from the Middle East across India, Indonesia, central Asia, to China and the Philippines: this is the scope of Hong Kong-based Star TV, which began broadcasting in April 1991.

After one year of operation, a conservative estimate of Star's reach was 11.16 million households across its viewing area.

As Australia's ABC attempts to move into the Asian market with its Australia TV International (ATVI), launched in February, the Star TV service is worth a close look as an example of what ATVI is up against. Star TV has already gained a strong foothold. Satellite television generally is proliferating in the region, with Japan, Indonesia and Arab countries all getting into the act. European satellites already reach as far as India, and the Japanese are concerned about the impact of services carried on PanAmSat on their existing services.

Star TV marketing executive Andrew Reilly, speaking at the AIC conference in February, said that the starting point for the Star TV operation had been the limited choice of television available in most Asian countries, with the exception of Japan: an average of two and a half channels per country, with the test pattern the predominant program for much of the day, compared with an average of 25 channels in the US and Europe.

Star TV makes available five channels, 24 hours a day. They are:

- MTV Asia - an Asian version of the successful US music clip channel;
- Prime Sports - a joint venture with the US company;
- a Mandarin-language Chinese channel, reaching 50m people outside China alone;
- BBC World Service TV;
- Star Plus - family entertainment.

Star TV is a joint venture between the huge company Hutchison

Whampoa and a company owned by Li Ka-Shing, reputed to be HK's richest man. Working out of a state-of-the-art purpose-built complex in Hong Kong, it was established for a fraction of the cost of Murdoch's UK satellite TV operation. It is now run by Julian Mounter, formerly of TVNZ.

Star TV is not a pay TV service - though of course people have to purchase the receiving equipment (current cost around \$A1000). It is essential that a service starts as free-to-air, Reilly said, if it is to penetrate the market quickly and successfully. Star TV plans to move into subscription services later, and ultimately there will be a three-level service: pay per view, subscription and free to air.

Star TV recently established a company, Media Assets, to acquire programs by purchasing the rights and through co-productions. It aims to become the leading Asian media distribution company. Reilly said that Star TV represented an 'enormous opportunity' for Australian producers, and also for Australian advertisers. Star TV's Australian purchases have included Beyond 2000 and some nature programs, but Star is reportedly offering low prices for Australian material.

This may have given rise to a rumour here that Star TV's advertising revenue is significantly below predictions. Andrew Reilly vehemently denied this, saying that they had nearly 350 advertisers, including major spenders like Coca Cola, Nike and the big electronics companies.

Getting To the Audience

Star TV's program schedules are listed in 216 newspapers and magazines from Cyprus to East Asia. It has become the second largest monthly regional publisher, with 850,000 program guides produced each month in ten separate

country editions, as well as a guide specifically for hotels.

A novel service is Star TV's info fax line, promoted on air, which invites people to dial a Hong Kong number and press the Start button on their fax to receive that day's and the subsequent week's programs, all for the cost of a one-minute call. Over 230,000 calls (including some from Australia) have been made on this service since last June.

Star TV's AsiaSat signal comprises two paired footprints, the southern beam using PAL and the northern beam, NTSC. It is delivered by a variety of means:

Direct broadcast: the predominant mode in Indonesia and the Middle East.

Terrestrial re-broadcast: for example, in Bahrein and in the Philippines, where a station in Manila rebroadcasts one of the Star TV channels.

Cable: much used in Taiwan, China and India.

SMATV (Satellite Master Antenna): this is virtually the only possibility in Hong Kong itself, given the terrain. Also much used for hotels, 120,000 of which across the region are taking Star TV services.

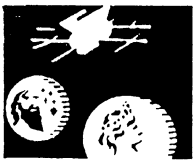
MDS: an increasing number of MDS operators are starting up all over the region.

AsiaSat 2, due to be launched in December next year, will be the most powerful commercial satellite yet, with up to 28 C-band channel capacity.

The Programs (and Ads)

The cultural impact of a service like Star TV on countries as diverse as those it covers, and people who may never before have seen any form of television, even one sanctioned by their own government, is difficult to imagine.

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For example, how does Star TV handle alcohol advertising given that it is broadcasting to Islamic countries? How would the uninhibited Western hedonism of MTV go down in say, Indonesia or India?

Star applies 'rigid self-censorship', Reilly says - unlike Canal Plus, which can be picked up in India and has attracted a big following there for its 'sexy' programs. There are no hard alcohol ads, and other program matter is carefully vetted for potential offence. Nevertheless, the task seems daunting.

Some countries, like Brunei, Saudi Arabia and North Korea, ban satellite receivers altogether, though this is certainly a losing battle in the long run (and the Sultan of Brunei is in fact a subscriber!). China has taken enthusiastically to a more open media, and there are now 21 officially sanctioned services. The Chinese government was one of the original joint venturers in AsiaSat, which carries Star TV.

The BBC World Service channel, which carries finance news, documentaries and nature programs as well as straight news, encountered resistance at first because of its relentlessly British ethnocentricity. Reilly said that Star TV was 'proud of the way the BBC had localised its programs'. The news is now pitched more firmly to the interests of the Star TV audience, and presenters for the service have been changed to represent an appropriate ethnic mix.

To cater for different sporting tastes and interests in Asia, less than 35 per cent of the programming on Prime Sports, Star TV's sports channel, is the same as in the United States. The service has to allow for such variations as a passion for baseball at the eastern end of its footprint, and a mania for cricket at the western end which largely accounted for Star TV's rapid penetration of India, Pakistan and some Middle East markets. Luckily, time zone differences help in scheduling.

The MTV service, which has always used Asian VJs, has changed from a strongly American style to one more suited to its target audiences, and has stimulated a rapidly growing

Asian videoclip industry where one barely existed before. New star performers with massive followings in different countries have been created. The cross-cultural implications are mind-boggling.

Warning Note Sounded

As Andrew Reilly was touting the success of Star TV, amid much enthusiasm at the AIC conference for television opportunities in Asia, both Professor Peter Westerway and Frank Waldron, MD of TV Australia Satellite Systems, sounded a cautionary note.

They emphasised the need for considerable time, effort and thought to be spent on any Australian project directed to Asia. Waldron said his company had taken several years to establish a weather data monitoring system, and that he had spent a total of 165 days in Jakarta in one year as part of the process of negotiation. A crucial aspect of building the system was that the contract involved training local staff and providing technical assistance for three years after completion.

Waldron said that 'we (Australia) should not be hypnotised by the stereotype of Asia's teeming millions, all half starved and wanting us to gobble them up'. There are burgeoning middle classes in several countries such as India, Malaysia and Indonesia that are becoming attractive markets, he said, and the Asia-Pacific region is growing faster than any other part of the world - much faster than Australia.

National advertising in larger heterogeneous countries like Indonesia and the Philippines can be difficult to sell, Waldron said. Only some manufacturers and importers distribute nationally, and the cost per thousand relevant viewers may be too high. Moreover, consumers in unserved areas will react with hostility: try selling Johnny Walker from Singapore to Saudi Arabia, he said.

He noted that the real success story of Star TV has not been the BBC, Prime Sports, MTV or the (mostly American) movie channel, but the

Mandarin channel, which offers a mix of material from the countries within the region with a strong or dominant Chinese component: China, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong. Its most successful programs have been those featuring Chinese culture with a strong appeal to the Chinese diaspora throughout South East Asia, and Star has begun, he said, to add Mandarin soundtracks to the BBC news, and sports features like the US Open.

Perhaps most important of all, Waldron said that the very assumptions which we bring to making a program may cause offence.

Think about the disconcerting experience of watching Soldier Blue, where for the first time in mainstream Hollywood the US cavalry were the bad guys and the Indians were the victims. Did you see the Japanese in World War 2 as aggressors or liberators? And what about programs like Chances, which I'm told the Nine Network are now beaming into PNG? How would that sit with the social values of a Muslim fundamentalist?

While authorities in some countries have attempted to stem the tide, it will prove impossible. But the answer to social chaos cannot be simply to assert the 'freedom of the press', he said, because in the final analysis we all have a stake in orderly change.

The threat is that transnational corporations seeking global efficiencies will swamp the cultures of Asia with material designed for totally difference audiences, with production values the local programs cannot hope to match. Australian broadcasters could, with our experience and technical skills, offer a different approach, one which seeks to educate and inform as well as entertain.

Waldron suggested three paramount principles should characterise our dealings with Asia when it comes to television:

- Encourage cultural maintenance at every opportunity;
- Promote our joint interest in better understanding each other's peoples and cultures;
- Approach everything we do with balance and sensitivity. □