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Commercial influences on
Indian public-service broadcasting

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In the UK, the Conservative Party has been drafting a proposal to withhold part of the consumers' broadcasting licence fee from the BBC and place it in a contestable fund for public-service programming. In Australia, the ABC continues to struggle to meet its funding requirements just when the Federal conservative coalition government is considering a bid to use public funding to engage a commercial consortium to run the country's Asia-Pacific television channel and so take it away from the ABC. These struggles for independence and for an appropriate level of funding are part of the landscape of public-service broadcasting in many developed countries. Those who believe in the public-service ethos are concerned about the potential diminishing value of these great broadcasting assets because of privatisation and commercialisation. However, this is the story of another public-service broadcaster - Doordarshan in India - which has had to live with severe competition from the skies since 1991. As the former dominant broadcaster in the largest democracy in the world, Doordarshan has survived and revived itself many times in the past four and a half decades. However, it continues to struggle to fulfil its role as a mass medium for education and entertainment. This paper explores the role of public-service broadcasting using Doordarshan as a case study. It asks: Does commercialisation of this public broadcaster mean privatisation by stealth or does it provide healthy distance between the broadcaster and the government of the day?

It has long been argued that public-service broadcasters should be free from revenue raising concerns if they are to achieve their goal of providing "comprehensive, varied and balanced television and radio programs of high quality for reception by the entire public" (Mendel 2000:1). A public-service broadcaster's specific functions include provision of "regular news services, a central educational role,
promotion of national culture and identity, entertainment, and serving the needs of minorities and other specialised interest groups” (Mendel 2000:1). It is seen as a powerful means of reflecting and shaping the cultural identity of a nation, where public-service broadcasting has “the central role of providing space for a diverse range of experiences, perceptions and arguments” (Norris et al 2003: 1).

However, in these times of economic rationalism, privatisation and globalisation, governments are becoming hesitant to fund public-service broadcasters from the general coffers. On the other hand, those who do not regularly listen to or watch public radio/television are reluctant to pay a compulsory fee for the same. There is also the administrative cost of collecting the broadcasting fee that governments can no longer justify. Of course, there is the conservative political ideology which believes that market forces can achieve everything that public-service broadcasting is trying to achieve, at a lesser cost to the tax-payers. As a result, funding for public-service broadcasting is drying up. As Mendel (2000: 4) notes in a UNESCO study:

The main threat today to the ability of public-service broadcasting organisations to fulfil their mandates stems from the financial restraints that are increasingly being placed on them. In these times of austerity, and with prevailing views relating to government downsizing, many public-service broadcasting organisations are being called upon to maintain previous levels of service while at the same time the level of public financial support for them is decreasing.

The pendulum of public policy on funding public-service broadcasting seems to have moved towards commercialisation. Competition from private broadcasters and the need to incorporate rapidly changing technological advances are forcing public broadcasters to boost their funding by selling their products and services in the commercial market. This in turn is making the private sector envious because it sees public broadcasters using their public and commercial funding to gain or retain market share in the
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entertainment business – the bastion of private television. In a relatively new trend, private television owners have begun lobbying governments to give them the public funding to provide public-service broadcasting at a lower cost (Cox 2003, Hassan 2005). So, the current mood is to take funding away from public-service broadcasters and allocate it for public-service programming irrespective of who produces it. Under the circumstances, many have raised the public policy question: if there is a need for the maintenance of a public-service broadcasting institution in the commercially driven multi-channel television environment? If so, then what should be the role and shape of such a public-service broadcaster? (Graham 2000; Hargreaves Heap 2005; Norris et al 2003).

Funding pressures for public-service broadcasters in developing countries are further compounded by the fact that governments are cash-strapped and have a priority to meet many basic needs of their population. India is no different. It is the most populous democracy and still has more than a quarter of a billion people living below the poverty line (Economic Survey 2002). Although the Indian government after independence accepted the principle of “public-service” broadcasting, it did not jump on the band-wagon of introducing a television service in the country till 1959. When the government did introduce television technology in the country, it did not want the private sector to own the broadcast media because of its potential power to persuade the masses. But, developments in the 1990s have had an enormous impact on Indian television industry. And, the public-service broadcasters had to let go of their monopoly and learn to survive in a commercially driven multi channel market.

The beginnings

The decision to develop radio and television services in India can almost be termed an after-thought. All India Radio (AIR) was established under British rule in India in 1936 to disseminate information with a view to strengthening its rule. After
independence, AIR was established in 1947 with six stations and 18 transmitters located in metropolitan India. In subsequent years, apart from “reiterating the paternalistic role of the state”, AIR became a means to forge and disseminate “indigenous Indian culture” (Gupta 1998:18). However, by 1957, AIR introduced Vividh Bharati to cater to popular culture of Indian films and film songs. A decade later, in 1967 advertising was introduced on AIR, “which was partly a reflection of the beginning of the consumer market and a growing middle class in India” (Gupta 1998: 19).

Ironically for a planned economy, there was nothing planned about the development of television in India. In 1959, India launched television with a two-hour-a-week broadcast using the equipment left behind by a multinational company – Philips. The company had set up a closed-circuit television at an industrial exhibition in Delhi, following which it gave the equipment to the Indian government. As part of an experiment, AIR engineers used this equipment to put together the country’s first TV centre in Delhi in September 1959 (Ninan 1995). Teleclubs (community viewing clubs) were organised to watch this wonderful phenomenon while AIR premises were used to create a studio. The inception of Indian television was largely supported by foreign agencies and foreign governments (Ninan 1995; Gupta 1998; Singhal and Rogers 1989). On the software side, initial television programs were essentially produced by radio people or people with a strong theatrical background.

One way to understand the development of broadcasting in India is through its socio-political history. Being a poor country with increasing population, its leaders saw television as a luxury that a developing country could ill afford, irrespective of whether it was a private or a public enterprise (Gupta 1998). Therefore, until the mid-1970s, television remained an education-facilitating medium for a small population around Delhi. The Indian government’s broadcasting policy was also influenced by the general world view at the time, i.e. broadcasting technology, especially television, could be effectively used to impart education to the masses. Launching of
productions such as Krishidarshan in 1967 and later on Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) in 1975 were examples of this policy of using television as an education tool.

Doordarshan and early commercialisation

The progress in space technology in the 1970s nudged the Indian government to expand the reach of television in the country. In mid-1975, the well-known experiment SITE was launched to broadcast television programs to 2,400 villages in far-flung states of India. The daily four-hour broadcast was devoted to agriculture and a mix of news, culture, health and family planning. The experiment, which lasted a year, was extensively evaluated. Some analysts say that the experiment only partially succeeded because though television was a good source of initial information, it was not backed by ground-level implementation of the schemes it propagated (Chu, Schramm & Schramm 1991; Ninan 1995; Gupta 1998). However, in 1975-76 the official view was that the SITE project had been a success (NAMEDIA 1986) and therefore the idea that television could be used for developmental (and political) purposes was wholeheartedly accepted. In fact, that year Indian television, which had remained a wing (branch) of the AIR since its inception, was given a separate identity and a new organisation called Doordarshan (literally translated means - vision from far) was set up. But, Doordarshan still remained a part of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, receiving funding from general budget allocations similar to AIR.

On the political front, the early 1970s had already seen an expansion of television to some of the north-west states of Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir in an attempt to counter the propaganda telecast by neighbouring Pakistan. By mid-1975, the country was placed under a "State of Emergency" by Congress party leader and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Many democratic rights were suspended and the government used both AIR and Doordarshan to the maximum to spread its message and counter bad publicity and black-outs by private print media. Dozens of programs were churned
out overnight to popularise the government's 20-point programs including development goal such as irrigation, education, family planning, poverty alleviation and so on. The Information and Broadcasting ministry issued directives to black out opposition leaders from Doordarshan's news programs and their supporters from entertainment programs. Thus, began the legacy of censorship.

Around the same time in 1976, the era of commercialisation dawned for Doordarshan. In a bid to popularise television viewing in the country, Doordarshan started showing imported programs such as *I Love Lucy*. Later, to fund this new phase, Doordarshan started accepting advertisements, which were initially aired during imported programs. In the 1980s, two technological changes expanded Doordarshan's reach – one introduction of colour television and second the launch of India's first domestic communication satellite Insat-1A. Along with satellite transmission and low-power transmitters, Doordarshan could reach up to 50 per cent of the population by 1985 and its viewer numbers reached 60 million. This program of expansion and modernisation in the mid-1980s forced Doordarshan to raise more revenue via commercialisation. In effect, there were two opposite trends in Doordarshan's attempt at modernizing – one, it began raising revenue from sponsorship and advertising; and two, it continued to telecast tightly monitored and censored news and current affairs programs.

The commercialisation process proved to be a success as Doordarshan, which first began by offering free commercial time to the sponsors, was able to increase its advertising rates three times during the broadcast of the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* in 1988-89. However, it was the popularity of sit-coms such as *Hum-log* and *Buniyad* and later *Ramayan* (another Hindu epic) that laid the foundation for this commercial success. By 1988, Doordarshan's revenue increased to Rs. 1612.6 million from Rs. 7.7 million in 1976, a 200-fold increase (Doordarshan Handbook 1997; Singhal & Rogers 1989). Those in favour of commercialisation say it encourages competition among producers of goods and services, thus benefiting
viewers. Those who oppose commercialisation say that it will adversely affect the quality of programming and lead to consumerism, increasing people’s desire for material goods that they could ill-afford.

Several studies in late 1980s and early 1990s measured the impact of advertising on viewers. In a study of television viewers by Media Advocacy group (1997), participants accepted that advertisements on television had an impact on them and their children, and that they felt a desire to buy the products shown in the advertisements even when they did not need them. A study of the impact of television on rural Indian population by Johnson (2000) found that all members of the village families were influenced by advertisements they saw on television, but children and teenagers were more swayed than others and wanted to emulate the metropolitan lifestyle depicted therein. However, it needs to be remembered that it is not advertisements alone, but the entire programming genre on television that gives rise to a desire to imitate the urban lifestyle.

Since the beginning, television in India has been caught between fulfilling its developmental objectives and providing entertainment to masses. Academics and media critics may lament the influence of advertisement and commercialisation on Doordarshan. But, most of the television viewers did not find advertising on the public-service broadcaster offensive. For many relatively new viewers of television, advertisements were almost as interesting, informative and entertaining as the sponsored programs (Johnson 2000; Singhal & Rogers 1989). A survey in 1987 found that nearly 76 per cent respondents were in favour of commercial advertising on television and 90 per cent preferred Hindi film-based entertainment programs, while only 60 per cent of respondents said they appreciated educational and development programs (Singhal & Rogers 1989).
During the 1980s, Doordarshan continued to expand its reach both in terms of territory it could cover and number of viewers it could reach. Viewership increased, as did the commercial revenue as big business houses did not have any other audio-visual medium by which to advertise their products. Doordarshan enjoyed the monopoly and to some extent became compliant by not venturing too far from its set path of providing some “boring” development oriented programs; government oriented news; and privately sponsored and produced entertainment programs. However, in early 90s the Indian monolithic giant had to wake up to competition.

Impact of private and foreign television

With the introduction of VCRs in India in 1984, some dynamic entrepreneurs in Bombay launched what is today known as the cable network. Instead of people watching programs on their VCRs at home by buying or borrowing cassettes, the area cable operator connected their television set to a community network for a small fee. The airways were governed by an outdated legal framework provided by the Indian Telegraph Act 1885 which restricted the laying of cables in public property. But, there was no prohibition on receiving a TV signal from the skies. As a result in 1990, it was estimated that there were as many as 3,500 cable networks in India mainly providing entertainment programming to Indian middle class (Rahim 1994). The Persian Gulf crisis of 1991 further escalated the spread of cable networks to other parts of metropolitan India even as Li Kasing launched his STAR TV (later bought by Rupert Murdoch) operation from Hong Kong, beaming multi-channel television over the South Asian region including India. Reddi contends that it was the “coupling of satellite and cable television” that brought about this huge change in the Indian broadcasting scenario (Reddi 1996: 237). Without the cable television networks, the satellite television would not have gone far in India (Reddi 1996). Within a couple of years, satellite and cable television had created a situation of “de facto deregulation of control of the airwaves” by breaking Doordarshan's monopoly (Reddi 1996: 238).
In response to this competition from the skies, the Indian government allowed Doordarshan to expand its reach, by multiplying the number of channels available to national and regional viewers, and increasing the number of entertainment programs broadcast on Doordarshan. A government committee specifically looked into the proposal of opening up Doordarshan further to private entrepreneurs to counter the competition from overseas (Varadan 1991). Following lengthy discussions, “governmental instruction to Doordarshan was (sic) to increase substantially its entertainment content during the prime evening slots, by making changes in schedules and by reducing the time devoted to news, “taking it further away from its goals of providing developmental programming (Reddi 1996: 239).

Doordarshan expanded its service in 1993 by launching five new satellite channels similar to those broadcast by STAR TV: the Entertainment Channel, the Music Channel, the Business and Current Affairs Channel, the Enrichment Channel and the Sports Channel. Doordarshan’s regional language satellite channels commenced in October 1993, broadcasting programs in Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Malayalam, Marathi and others. DD-3, an exclusive service of programs on literature, theatre, dance, music and other performing arts and issues like the environment, consumer’s rights, and sex discrimination was launched in November 1995. Doordarshan India, the international channel, was launched in March 1995 with the help of AsiaSat-I transponder. The international service was beamed through PAS-4, which covers SAARC countries, Gulf, West Asia, Central Asia, North Africa and Europe. Of course, one could question the timing of launching multiple channels when Doordarshan (and India) had had the access to using satellite technology since late 1970s.

On the programming front, Doordarshan opened up its network to private producers by allowing them to solicit for programming slots on the “first-come, first-serve” basis. Before mid-1990s, it would have been unimaginable to have a private company
produce a national news program for Doordarshan. The national DD-1 channel not only carried the official news bulletin produced by in-house journalists, but a 20-minute news program by a private production house. The number and quality of sitcoms underwent a major revolution, too. Instead of being restricted to pro-development soap operas such as *Hum Log*, viewers could watch *Campus* (a soap opera based on a university campus life where politicians use students for small gains and close links between politics and crime) and *Mirch Masala* (a purely entertainment show on films and film stars) among others. By March 1997, Doordarshan claimed that its 19 channels were watched by an estimated 296 million primary (home) viewers and 152 other viewers (including television sets provided to schools for education and to villages for community viewing), taking its total viewership to 448 million viewers (Doordarshan Handbook 1997).

On the advertising front, Doordarshan started relaxing the Indian “General rules of conduct for television and radio advertising” to be more accommodating than before when the advertisers were urged not to “offend against morality, decency and religious susceptibilities of the people.” The code was changed to allow advertisements by foreign films, banks and airlines among others. Critics examining the development of Indian television, say that as television grew, development alternatives steadily eschewed, and over the years hardware expansion was undertaken with no evidence of planning for software (Rajgopal 1993). But, Doordarshan had little choice as government funding reduced and market conditions worsened.

Doordarshan would not have responded to the challenge of foreign television the way it did if it was not for the political atmosphere at the time. The process of liberalisation or privatisation had been alluded to by Rajiv Gandhi in the mid-1980s. However, he could not achieve much change on the ground. Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated in November 1989. His party, the Congress, came to power in 1991-92 with a mixture of new and old breed of politicians. When in 1991-92 India came close to defaulting on paying back the
IMF loan, some ruling members vowed to open up the economy to avoid pitfalls of continuous trade deficit. Some believe that IMF might have had a hand in forcing India to open up its economy to foreign competition. What followed was a spate of policies leading to devaluation of the Indian currency - the rupee, lowering of tariffs and taxes, removal of license raj (regime) for most of the industries, partial streamlining of procedures for setting up new industries and businesses, removal of subsidies for some of the sectors to make them internationally competitive (McDowell 1997; Manchanda 1993). However, in the media industry (both print and broadcast) despite a demand for liberalisation from some media players, government resisted the option of allowing foreign media owners to operate from India until 2003. At the same time, the Information & Broadcasting Ministry could/did not stop the broadcast of private and foreign channels from the skies into Indian homes.

**Formation of Prasar Bharati (Broadcasting Corporation of India)**

The call for an autonomous public-service broadcasting system in India was finally heeded in 1997 with the formation of Prasar Bharati Board (Broadcasting Corporation of India). After the state of emergency in the mid-1970s, Doordarshan was massively used as a propaganda machine for the ruling party. The Congress government led by late Indira Gandhi was defeated in the 1977 elections. The new Janata Party government commissioned a “white paper” on the misuse of the broadcast media during the Emergency period. It also established a committee to look at the issue of autonomy for the broadcast media. This Committee, headed by a former newspaper editor B G Verghese, recommended that Doordarshan should be run as an autonomous organisation. The Committee also recommended the use of low power transmitters to localise programming by attaching minimal production facility with each station. It suggested using half-inch video technology to produce low-cost, community oriented programming (Ninan 1995; Verghese 1978).
However, the recommendation to give more autonomy to Doordarshan and AIR was not implemented till the end of 1997, when the left-wing government in New Delhi decided to keep its election promise and notified the long-pending Prasar Bharati Act 1990, which facilitated the formation of Prasar Bharati Board (Broadcasting Corporation of India). Doordarshan and AIR both came under the management of this autonomous board. This in turn, raised viewers and media critics’ expectations about the autonomy of Doordarshan in general and enhanced editorial freedom in covering news and current affairs. Sinha and other media analysts described “the Government’s decision to implement Prasar Bharati – with the prospect of greater autonomy for Doordarshan and AIR” as “a momentous step in the history of public-service broadcasting in India” (Sinha 1998: 22). In early 1998, when the researcher spoke to a number of media analysts and media personalities, opinions were still divided about the level of credibility Doordarshan had gained under Prasar Bharati. Even viewers in the audience survey in 1998 believed that Doordarshan’s coverage of news had improved, but they wanted further improvements (Manchanda 1998).

However, it is important to note that Doordarshan gained credibility by contracting out news and current affairs coverage to private producers and allowing them more and more editorial freedom over the years. As Thapar pointed out that previously, independent news program producers were forced to submit their tapes for a preview to Doordarshan before going to air. But, now “Doordarshan has established itself as a free credible channel, and the greatest example of this is that Aaj Tak, which is an independently made news program on Doordarshan, now boasts of its freedom” (Thapar 1998). On the other hand, NDTV proprietor Prannoy Roy who produced a news and current affairs program for Doordarshan in 1997, believed otherwise (1998).

In contrast, the changes in Doordarshan’s own in-house produced daily news programs were much slower because of a lack of equipment and trained manpower, and, perhaps because it produced
a large number of news programs in various languages and had to meet its "social objectives" at the same time (Churchill 1998). One of the reasons why Doordarshan functions the way it does, according to critics, is that, "given the security of tenure government employees enjoy regardless of performance, and the virtual absence of incentives for merit, there is a powerful tendency towards institutional inertia" (Rajgopal 1993: 93). The international commission for the study of communication problems in 1986 noted that the governments of many developing countries, in an attempt to minimise the dangers of monopoly in the "persuasive" power of the broadcast media, became involved in the management of the media. Hence, the idea of an autonomous but socially responsible broadcasting authority could not materialise (McBride 1980: 102). India is no different to many other developing Asian and African countries, where good-intentioned government monopoly over the broadcast media has hindered the growth of radio and television as credible media because of social and political compulsions.

Doordarshan today: statistics and perceptions

In 2000-2001, with the breaking of its monopoly and tightening of government purse strings, Doordarshan decided to compete for the advertising rupee and there was no stopping it. Doordarshan's advertising crossed the Rs. 6000 million mark when it reached Rs. 6375.1 million (approximately AUS$260 million). In spite of the 11 September 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre in the US and the economic slowdown, Doordarshan was able to earn Rs. 6152 million in year 2001-2002 (Doordarshan Commercial Service – An Overview 2003). Doordarshan's web site www.ddindia.com talks about its success in revenue terms rather than programming or being able to meet the objectives of a public-service broadcaster. The 1990s saw an end of Doordarshan's monopoly with the advent of many private and foreign television channels like CNN, BBC, Star, Zee, Sony, etc. Doordarshan officials boast of successfully safeguarding its revenue by adopting various market-friendly policies. The broadcaster's web site states:
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Doordarshan is a public-service broadcaster and hence revenue earning can only be a by-product of its mission and objectives, but it does not undermine the importance of revenue earning. Revenue earning may not be an end in itself, but it is a powerful means to its ultimate end (Doordarshan Commercial Service – an overview 2003: 1).

That end is that Doordarshan needs to make “a significant contribution to accelerate socio-economic change, promote national integration and stimulate scientific temper” (Doordarshan Commercial Service – An Overview 2003: 1). Whether Doordarshan presently meets this end is a moot question.

The concept of public-service broadcasting in India

The best way to understand the concept of public-service broadcasting as applied in the Indian context is to look at the “Functions and Powers” of the Prasar Bharati Board (Broadcasting Corporation of India), which manages the two public-service broadcasters in India – Doordarshan (television) and AIR (radio). The main aims of these two broadcasters are no different from any other public-service broadcasters in the world, that is to “inform, educate and entertain” the public. The Prasar Bharati Act 1990 states that “it shall be the primary duty of the corporation to organise and conduct public broadcasting services to inform, educate and entertain the public and to ensure a balanced development of broadcasting on radio and television” (The Prasar Bharati Act 1990: 12). The Prasar Bharati board when discharging its functions is expected to be guided by a number of objectives [see Appendix 1] including, “(b) safeguarding the citizen’s right to be informed freely, truthfully and objectively on all matters of public interest, national or international, and presenting a fair and balanced flow of information including contrasting views without advocating any opinion or ideology of its own” (The Prasar Bharati Act 1990: 12).
If you decipher the objectives entrusted to the corporation, some of the expectations and scope of the public-service broadcasting are similar to the ones envisaged in Australia and the UK. The Indian public-service broadcasters need to provide a comprehensive service to all communities and sections of the society, a principle identified by Tracey (1998: 26) when defining public-service broadcasting:

Public broadcasting has historically sought to ensure that its signals are available to all. It is axiomatic to the public broadcasting community that no one should be disenfranchised by distance or by accident of geography. The imperative which guides this principle is not that of maximizing customers in a market but of serving citizens in a democracy.

The "universality" principle as discussed by Tracey and others includes the expansion of broadcasting infrastructure in India, under which the AIR and Doordarshan both claim to reach more than 90 per cent of the geographical area and population (at least one national channel). So, public-service broadcasting in India is "universal" and, not dependent on the private entrepreneurs' cost-benefit analysis of its profitability. Similarly, public-service broadcasting in India is "comprehensive" as it is expected to cater to all communities and their interests - rural, remote, minorities, women, children, various tribes, the aged etc. The Indian public-service broadcasting is based on the principle of "serving the national diversity of a society" as described by Tracey (1998: 27). The public broadcasters' role in India is also to "uphold (sic) the unity and integrity of the country" by producing and broadcasting programs which speak to all citizens, thereby giving "a burning sense of the collective, of belonging to the national-as-community" (Tracey 1998: 28). Doordarshan's attempt at creating programs such as Hum Log (we the people) and Buniyaad (the foundation stone) in the 1980s were successful examples of this principle.

The other concept which is relevant in the Indian context is that of "governmentality" as described by Jacka, (1997: 9) in a working paper on Australian public-service broadcasting. She points to the
role of a public-service broadcaster as an educator, of being part of “governmentality” - “that is part of the scrutiny of populations with a view to intervention in their civic and moral training”. Jacka (1997: 11) refers to the 1960s speech by ABC chairman, Dr James Darling, to explain the educational role of a public-service broadcaster in society.

The influence of the medium is great, particularly since Television. The voice and picture from our transmitters penetrates into the homes of the public, they attach both eye and ear, they carry on hour after hour, day after day, week after week: they impose, if not views, at least impressions, consciously and sub-consciously: they have become in many cases the substitute for theatre and cinema, for public meetings, for books and even for newspapers. They can affect all who can hear or see, and their influence is not confined to the literate. In the hands of those who might be ready to use the medium for purposes of propaganda they can be a very powerful instrument.

The Indian public-service broadcasting was initially developed as a powerful tool for educating and informing the masses - as a development communication tool. However, in the late 1970s this tool became a propaganda tool for the ruling party as politicians realised the power of the broadcasting media. This misuse of the public broadcast media continues today by local, state and federal ministers and bureaucracy pressuring Doordarshan and AIR employees to publicise their programs and successes in the name of educating and informing the masses (Anonymous 2001; Raman 2005).

The practice of public-service broadcasting in India

From the beginning, the public-service broadcasting in India has been controlled by the government to ensure that it met the social objectives set out in its charter [see Appendix 2]. The socio-economic and political atmosphere in the 50s and 1960s was such that nation building was the paramount principle of all. And, one tool of nation building was to unite and integrate the citizens of the
country by disseminating a unified message as far and wide as possible via the broadcast media. Since the press or the print media were already in private hands, a need was felt to keep the broadcast media in public ownership. Although, AIR and Doordarshan were/are answerable to parliament, in reality these public institutions became hostage to the governing political leaders (Gupta 1998, NAMEDIA 1986, Ninan 1995, Reddi 1996, Sinha 1997 and Verghese 1978). Perhaps, it is an indictment on the nature of democracy in India, that it has been difficult to separate the power of the parliament and the ruling party/parties. Sinha (1997) says the parliament, which was supposed to lay down programming guidelines and annual budgets for the public-service broadcasters, in effect became the rubber-stamp for the Information and Broadcasting ministry. “The tight control over Doordarshan’s finances has been one of the instruments through which the government has controlled the growth and development of television in India” (Sinha 1997:135).

By 1976, when the government decided to allow Doordarshan to accept advertising to boost its revenue, it abandoned the principle of public funding for public-service broadcasting. By 1994, following the principles of self-sufficiency in a market economy, Doordarshan was ordered to raise revenue for its future expansion. “The problem with Doordarshan is that coming of the satellite channels coincided with the period the planning commission decided that it had enough of funding it (Doordarshan). Just when you needed money the most, it began to be withdrawn” (Ninan 2003).

There are two views about the commercial success of Prasar Bharati Board (spear-heading both Doordarshan and AIR). One view is that the Board has been successful because in 2001-2002, Prasar Bharati’s revenue was pegged at Rs. 7118.8 million, whereas its running cost was Rs. 10,508.3 million (Anonymous 2002a). Considering the competition from nearly 50-60 other channels in the commercial market, it had done well to maintain and earn about 70 per cent of its keep. However, there are others including the then
Information and Broadcasting minister, Sushma Swaraj, who felt that Prasar Bharati needed to go further and become self-sufficient.

In fact, in 2003 the Prasar Bharati board accepted the government’s challenge to generate sufficient revenue from its newly re-launched DD News so that it achieved self-sufficiency in three years. “To attract revenue we are looking at people who can sponsor programmes (on DD News)” (Anonymous 2003a: 1). In one of the most sensitive areas of television programming, where Doordarshan’s credibility has been in question for decades, it is privatisation and commercialisation which are expected to provide it the independence it so craves.

The future

After losing its monopoly in the 1990s, Doordarshan has survived and revived as a result of competition from the market (in some metropolis markets cable subscribers can access more than 100 channel). It has expanded its reach by utilizing its capacity to reach more than 90 per cent of the population with a combination of terrestrial and satellite technology. It has many more entertainment programs, many produced and sponsored by private production houses. Media critics and academics may mourn the fact that television in India has moved away from the public-service principles of educating and informing the masses, it is a fact that since the advent of commercial television in India, television’s viewership has expanded to about 450 million (Doordarshan Handbook 1997). The Indian Readership Survey (IRS) 2002 based on an audience survey over a period of one year, puts the total number of people watching any TV at 369.9 million and those who watch cable and satellite channels at 181.7 million (Anonymous 2003b). The survey also notes that Doordarshan national channel DD1 dominates the chart with 31.4 per cent viewers and DD2 (the metro channel) is ranked 2nd with nearly 13.9 per cent viewers (Anonymous 2003c). Other private channels, which have commercial agenda and leaner operations, although have fewer viewers, are more profitable than Doordarshan.
The viewer numbers for Murdoch’s Star Plus were around 7.8 per cent of the total audience surveyed, Sony TV around 5.5 per cent, Zee TV around 4.7 per cent, ETV-Eenadu around 4.5 per cent (Anonymous 2003c). However, in urban India Star Plus with 25.1 per cent viewership was more popular than DD2 (the metro channel) with 19.5 per cent viewership (Anonymous 2003c).

Opinions are divided as to whether Doordarshan is meeting its public-service objectives. A media critic, Bajpai (2003), says there is no competition between Doordarshan and other channels. “The kind of programs they (Doordarshan channels) still offer or alternative they offer are still not available on satellite (channels). They are the ones that will bring you the Winter Olympics, Indian soccer, make space for programs on national dance or music, classical etc. So, to that extent their own mandate being different, they really are not in competition except in terms of commercial revenue” Bajpai says (Bajpai 2003). Bajpai even welcomes Doordarshan’s “boring” news bulletin since it provides straight-forward facts compared to sensational news presented by private channels. Wanwari (2003), the CEO of a television news web portal, acknowledges that people have more choice of channels and programs today than a decade ago when Doordarshan was the lone ranger in the television industry, but regrets the loss of “fantastic” programs of “superior” quality produced by Doordarshan in the 1980s.

Whereas today you are at a loss, what to watch? And, often good quality programs are lost because they are on the bad network (referring to Doordarshan’s bad reception in cities as cable operators put the free-to-air DD signal at the end of the spectrum to maximise their revenue from the pay channels).

But, it is the issues of lack of credibility and political interference that still plague public-service broadcasters in India. “State ownership and control was long justified on the ground that radio and television are a public service. But it was the State itself, by virtue of its dominance of the country’s political economy, that was
the biggest threat to public broadcasting during the past 45 years” (Sinha 1998: 23). In fact, some Indian media commentators believe that “autonomy is just a concept, it does not exist. And, I don’t think it exists anywhere in the world frankly” (Abraham 2003). Some critics say that Prasar Bharati Corporation and the experiment in providing autonomy to public-service broadcasters in India have failed, because of the Corporation’s inability to divest itself of government power and control. “In fact, in the last two years you’ve seen far greater control by government … nothing passes without the minister seeing it. So, they’ve gone back to olden days” (Ninan 2003). On the other hand, Gupta contends that “(the) battle is not about ratings and advertising revenue. It is really about “determining the framework for debate” and, for the present at least, Doordarshan has lost this battle. It has accepted the new rules of the game as defined in terms of revenue maximisation and shifted its agenda to providing entertainment rather than enlightenment” (Gupta 1998: 77).

Although this decline of the public-service orientation of national broadcasting systems is a world-wide phenomenon, Doordarshan’s fate was sealed a long time ago when, in the days of no-competition from the commercial and foreign channels, it underutilised its capacity to produce quality entertainment programs. What did not help the Indian public-service broadcaster, besides the constant interference and reliance on the government of the day to dictate day-to-day decisions, was a short-sightedness in understanding the role of a public-service broadcaster and a failure to create brand loyalty with the public similar to that created by the BBC and ABC. Only in recent times might you hear media analysts and viewers in general defend the existence of Doordarshan. In the first three decades (1960-1990) of no competition, there was no one else to criticise. Doordarshan, too, failed to do its job well enough to arouse any positive response from anyone – those who wanted a vibrant public-service broadcaster in the country and those who were not entertained by their idiot box.
However, there is an emerging view that the role and need for "public-service broadcasting" in India has been rejuvenated as a result of the competition from private and foreign television players. The Prasar Bharati chief executive, K S Sarma, argues that although public-service broadcasting no longer enjoys a monopoly status, "it will always remain an important reminder of the social and cultural responsibilities of the media in an age when the thrust is overwhelmingly oriented towards consumerism. The more commercial the television market becomes, the role of a public broadcaster correspondingly becomes that much more necessary" (Anonymous 2002b: 4). But the question remains, who will save public-service broadcasting from commercialisation?

Media analysts argue that even in this digital multi-channeling era, public-service broadcasters should be supported by public funding as a force for the development of citizenship and as an insurance against market failures to meet the needs of various populations (Graham 2000; Hargreaves Heap 2005; Holland 2003). Others argue that the setting up of an Arts Council to fund public-service programming is a more efficient and accountable process (Cox 2003). But the Indian case is different. It will take a few years before it reaches a point of market saturation in the television industry. According to the latest figures, more than half the households in India subscribe to cable and satellite service, in effect, to private and foreign channels (Indiantelevision.com Team 2005). There is still half the population which watches only public-service programming on a handful of Doordarshan television channels.

The funding question too is different in India because the Indian government needs to prioritise its funding commitment and 100 per cent funding of public-service broadcasting is not on its agenda (Narayanamurthy 2000). In fact, because of the central government's constant interference in Doordarshan and AIR's functioning, since 1966 there has been a call for autonomy (independence), with a recommended solution that commercial revenue should pay for the public-service broadcasters. In the latest
review of Prasar Bharati (Broadcasting Corporation of India), the committee reiterates the significance of public-service broadcasting due to the population’s need for information and education which commercial media is unable to meet, but it also advocates self sufficiency via commercial revenue (Narayanamurthy 2000). Perhaps, in the next few years, the ills of commercialisation and a chase for revenue will bring the pendulum back to the “public” funding of public-service broadcasting.

Considering the imperatives of commercial revenue for Prasar Bharati Corporation and its need for self-sufficiency to gain real autonomy from politicians, it seems Doordarshan needs parallel emphasis, where it maintains its competitiveness in the advertising market and yet meets its charter obligations. This is difficult, but not impossible, if one is to consider the co-existence of the advertising and editorial departments in a newspaper organisation. The independence of the editorial department in selecting news and views for the paper’s editorial pages is paramount, but the paper cannot survive without the revenue it earns from advertisements placed in the media. The ideological struggle between the independence of news and information against the need to raise revenue continues at several quality newspapers in the world. In the end, it is the management’s commitment to bring out a quality newspaper where the editorial department is largely free from being concerned about raising revenue that can balance the boat. Similarly, in case of Indian public-service broadcasters (AIR and Doordarshan), it is the “independent” Prasar Bharati board which can bring a balance between meeting the “social change” needs of the deprived one-third of the population living below or near poverty line, and the rest who can afford a television set and cable subscription (the middle class which may want more ‘entertainment than educational programs on television). The Prasar Bharati board, as the Prasar Bharati review suggests, also needs to concern itself with “developing taste” by encouraging creativity and production of quality programming, thereby correcting market deficiencies (Narayanamurthy 2000).
Similarly, the Indian government, which has an obligation to meet the developmental needs of the large population of the poor in the country, must facilitate and encourage public-service broadcasting by Doordarshan and AIR, and other private and community broadcasters. First and foremost, it needs to put in place a legal framework, which provides for plurality of voices and decentralisation of broadcast industry rather than let the de facto deregulation continue (which has been since 1991). In fact, various government committees have recommended such a move, where private, non-commercial community players such as universities, local governments and non-government agencies are given licences to broadcast their television signals in India (Paswan 1996 and Varadan 1991). Four and a half decades of experience of the blurring of lines between public owned or government funded broadcasting cannot be erased, but self-sufficiency of Doordarshan and AIR may put some distance between the political party in power and the broadcasters' trustees (Prasar Bharati Board).

On the public-service programming front, it is worth visiting some of the ideas and experiments tried in other countries. The Indian government can look at the option of prescribing certain levels of public-service broadcasting (in consultation with the public) by all broadcasters, not just Doordarshan and AIR, including specifying levels of local content and children's programming. It can consider the idea of setting up a contestable fund for public-service programming open to all players with the aim to lift the standard of innovative education and development oriented programming. The long-pending Broadcasting Bill 1997 had foreshadowed such a move when it stated that licences could be granted for broadcast over limited areas using terrestrial broadcasting systems, including institutions which provided education, community service, environment protection or health awareness (The Broadcasting Bill 1997). Whether it is the institution of public-service broadcasting in the form of Doordarshan or AIR or it is the emphasise on the need for public-service broadcasting programming irrespective of who produces it, the Indian government must make a commitment to the
existence of public-service broadcasting in the country. Ultimately, what is required is the political will, accentuated by enlightened public pressure, to allow public-service broadcasting in India to fulfil its objective of “informing, educating and entertaining” the entire population.

Appendix 1

These are the objectives guiding the functioning of the Prasar Bharati Corporation:

a) upholding the unity and integrity of the country and the values enshrined in the Constitution;

b) safeguarding the citizen's right to be informed freely, truthfully and objectively on all matters of public interest, national or international, and presenting a fair and balanced flow of information including contrasting views without advocating any opinion or ideology of its own;

c) paying special attention to the fields of education and spread of literacy, agriculture, rural development, environment, health and family welfare and science and technology;

d) providing adequate coverage to the diverse cultures and languages of the various regions of the country by broadcasting appropriate programs;

e) providing appropriate coverage to sports and games so as to encourage healthy competition and the spirit of sportsmanship;

f) providing appropriate programs keeping in view the special needs of the youth;

g) informing and stimulating the national consciousness in regard to the status and problems of women and paying special attention to the uplifting of women;

h) promoting social justice and combating exploitation, inequality and such evils as untouchability and advancing the welfare of the weaker sections of the society;

i) safeguarding the rights of the working classes and advancing their welfare;

j) serving the rural and weaker sections of the people and those residing in border regions, backward or remote areas;

k) providing suitable programs keeping in view the special needs of the minorities and tribal communities;

l) taking special steps to protect the interests of the children, the blind, the aged, the handicapped and other vulnerable Sections of the people;
m) promoting national integration by broadcasting in a manner that facilitates communication in the languages in India; and facilitating the distribution of regional broadcasting services in every State in the languages of that State;

n) providing comprehensive broadcast coverage through the choice of appropriate technology and the best utilization of the broadcast frequencies available and ensuring high quality reception;

o) promoting research and development activities in order to ensure that radio and television broadcast technology are constantly updated; and

p) expanding broadcasting facilities by establishing additional channels of transmission at various levels.

Appendix 2

Social objectives of Doordarshan as given in the Handbook 1997 are:

a) to act as a catalyst for social change

b) to promote national integration

c) to stimulate a scientific temper in the minds of the people

d) to disseminate the message of family planning as a means of population control and family welfare

e) to provide essential information and knowledge in order to stimulate greater agricultural production

f) to promote and help preserve environment and ecological balance

g) to highlight the need for social welfare measures including welfare of women, children and the less privileged

h) to promote interest in games and sports

i) to create values of appraisal of art and cultural heritage.

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