

CENTRE | RAJIV MEHROTRA

Is Prasar Bharati its master's voice?

The public, legal face of its autonomy belies the reality of its relationship with the I&B Ministry

The Prasar Bharati Corporation that administers DD and AIR has been in limbo and decay for decades. The average age of its demoralised programme staff is 50-plus. Urban elites see it as obsolete and out of sync with audiences. The challenges are overwhelming. After a long night, there is a glimmer of possibility. We must support this.

Deepening reach

Prasar Bharati is expanding its reach among regional and rural audiences, the disadvantaged and the disenfranchised, providing them local content in tune with their needs and tastes. This is a core constituency for a public service broadcaster. Last year, the viewership of DD's Kisan channel grew by 60%, that of a bouquet of its regional channels by nearly 70% and the revenue from DD DTH (Direct To Home) service against competition from big players like Tata Sky and Airtel increased by 48%. DD is set to launch a major programming initiative for the critical North-East channel. It is completing a massive content commissioning and acquisition exercise. More than ₹100 crore has been invested in 100 different programmes in diverse genres. The Doordarshan/ Public Service Broadcasting Trust partnership has yielded 650 independent documentary films so far, with more to follow. They have won 59 national awards from the President of India and won an award from around the world for virtually every second film. It can be done! Make in India for the world!

A clear vision

The albatross around Prasar Bharati's neck is the ambiguity between the public, legal face of its autonomy and the reality of its relationship with Shastri Bhawan (where the office of the Information and Broadcasting Ministry in Delhi is located). It is confused about its role, its aspirations, about how its success and failures are to be judged: by the revenues it earns or its audience share. Are these to be compared to the commercially driven satellite channels? Should it be an articulator and promoter of the government's agenda and its point of view or should it strive to be a neutral media space for civil society?

It does not help its agendas and aspirations if its prime-time slots and identity are auctioned off to the highest bidder without even a reference to nature and quality of content – as was done. It will be more prudent to scale down Prasar Bharati in the short term and improve efficiency to lower costs.

An important investment

Public broadcasting justifies and needs public money because its emphasis, unlike commercial television, is to deliver messages to audiences motivated by the public good. It is the antidote to the cacophony of the private electronic media that delivers eyeballs to its advertisers. When successful, public broadcasting sets exemplary standards of quality and serves as an example of good taste, of decency and values; it is impartial and occupies a neutral space between the political agendas of the state and those with commercial agendas.

Prasar Bharati has struggled on most counts. It is not too late. It must have genuine autonomy and be encouraged to create and sustain a professional organisational structure to enable it to function with the transparency and accountability of a good public enterprise. In time this could evolve into a public-private partnership.

This is as important a public investment as in education, health care and an efficient legal justice system. A society that lacks an effective alternative media space and voice diminishes its fundamental democratic freedoms and choices while reinforcing the cultures of the privileged.

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