

TV news limited in range

Channels yet to acquire national character

by N. Bhaskara Rao

THE Doordashan News channel in its present avatar completes one year this month. As a 24-hour national news channel, it stands out for its overall performance. But news bulletins of neither of the news channels, including DD News, distinguish themselves as representative of India. An analysis of seven news channels for their contents brings out this fact. The extent of coverage of rural India, even in the case of DD News bulletins, is limited. This has been much below 2 per cent of the items in a week. In fact, about half of the items of news bulletins, including DD News, are from Delhi and Mumbai. DD News lags in terms of fineness in the production quality and in the quality of transmission at the receiving end in the case of Cable TV households.

DD's 24-hour news channel came up in November 2003 rather abruptly in place of the then popular Metro channel. The earlier DD News channel was closed in January 2002, 18 months after it came into being without a convincing explanation. NDTV/STAR (April 2003), Sahara News (March 2003), Aaj Tak (December 2000) and Zee News (1995) had been there for a longer period than DD News. The last couple of years have witnessed

holds without such an intervention.

News channels are expected to be concerned in their coverage about at least four parameters. Such a concern is expected to expand the scope of news coverage and viewership of news bulletins much beyond the present levels. The parameters are: origin of news, concern as evident from the subject matter of contents, the extent of repeat of certain news, and scope of coverage as news or features.

Contrary to general impression, and claims by some channels, DD News fared relatively better. Although 40 per cent of news items of the DD News bulletins are of Delhi-origin, against 37 per cent of other news channels, in terms of spread of news coverage across DD News does better. For example, a little over 10 per cent of the

News, however, only 2 per cent of the news items are on crime. The extent of items in the news bulletins from abroad has been far higher, next only to Delhi. About one-fifth of the items in the bulletins are from abroad and one-fifth of them, of course, are India-related. Certain shift in news coverage in favour of business and sports is striking.

Even as to the subject matter of news items covered by round-the-clock news bulletins, the range has been limited, which perhaps explains why the "penetration of TV" in general and news channels in particular remained almost stagnant during the last one year. The preoccupation with the politics of news channels is even more than the newspapers, as is evident from CMS Media Lab analysis. DD News, however, devotes only a

realised that their very credibility over time is getting eroded as an analysis of the CMS study has recently brought out. In fact, despite so many news channels and round-the-clock news bulletins, TV news is being viewed as an "appetiser" for prompting newspaper readership. That is, the more one sees news channels, the more likely one reads newspapers. That is how newspapers have recently proliferated and improved readership more where TV viewership has been higher.

There is an urgent need to revisit the basic tenets of public service broadcasting. DD must cater to a larger majority of the Indian audience. This means going much beyond cities. DD and AIR, put together, have far more field reporters across the country to ensure such a balance.

Doordarshan and AIR are facing challenges on several fronts today. These include financial sustainability, human resource development and deployment, marketing and positioning of the news channel. To be able to meet these challenges and make the most of new opportunities that the technology brings in, it is far more important for Prasar Bharati to operate as a corporate entity and professionalise the organisation. For this, the government should ensure finan-

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DD News also witnessed certain "revamp" in terms of people manning the channel. But DD operations remained at the mercy of the ministry. DD was thrown into a competitive mode in the "market place". That is how I supported the amendment to the Cable TV Regulation Act making it obligatory for Cable TV operators to show the DD News channel. It could not have withstood competitive compulsions in the case of cable TV house-

holds without such an intervention.

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news items in the DD News bulletins originate at Kolkata and Chennai, as against hardly a little in the case of other channels. Half or more of the news bulletins of the national channels cannot be from Delhi and Mumbai month after month.

The coverage of rural India by all news channels, including DD, has been a casual affair, as if to remind the viewers that they are a "national channel". Hardly 1 per cent of the items in the news bulletins of these various channels are from rural India. As much as 90 per cent of Budget coverage by channels in July- August 2004 was limited to Delhi. Even at times like the elections (national and state) the coverage from rural areas has not crossed 3 per cent against 7 per cent crime-related news. In the case of DD

quarter of the items of its bulletins on politics against about 33 per cent by other TV news channels.

Despite the proliferation of channels and intense competition, their over-all coverage of India has not expanded beyond what it was earlier in terms of news origination or subject focus. On the contrary, certain hype and trivialisation in coverage has been too obvious, and in the process the very definitions of news has changed. But technical quality and designing elements have come a long way. So also in terms of anchoring and interactivity.

News channels, of late, have been under hype in their coverage of certain items much beyond their relevance or significance as if it is a misperception that such coverage earns TRP points. These channels seem to have not

realised that their very credibility over time is getting eroded as an analysis of the CMS study has recently brought out. In fact, despite so many news channels and round-the-clock news bulletins, TV news is being viewed as an "appetiser" for prompting newspaper readership. That is, the more one sees news channels, the more likely one reads newspapers. That is how newspapers have recently proliferated and improved readership more where TV viewership has been higher.

There is an urgent need to revisit the basic tenets of public service broadcasting. DD must cater to a larger majority of the Indian audience. This means going much beyond cities. DD and AIR, put together, have far more field reporters across the country to ensure such a balance.

Doordarshan and AIR are facing challenges on several fronts today. These include financial sustainability, human resource development and deployment, marketing and positioning of the news channel. To be able to meet these challenges and make the most of new opportunities that the technology brings in, it is far more important for Prasar Bharati to operate as a corporate entity and professionalise the organisation. For this, the government should ensure financial support as annual "budgetary grant". Some serious efforts are already being made in this direction.

What is the problem with AIR and DD in becoming global players; except perhaps a lack of vision, mission and sustained support. An ad hoc view of broadcasting by each successive regime in the last 30 years has let down these two national institutes despite their unique role and immense potential. In fact, sometimes one gets the feeling that DD is being sabotaged, wittingly or unwittingly. Unless we have a vision first about broadcasting in its various forms and an understanding of the changing global scene in this regard, the right kind of initiatives cannot be expected. ■