

# National media policy a must

## DTH at what cost, for whose interests?

by N. Bhaskara Rao

**T**HE Minister for Information and Broadcasting announced recently in Parliament that Doordarshan was going ahead with its Direct-to-Home (DTH) service. The reasons given for this launch include that an amount of Rs 160 crore was already spent on the project and that it would help easy and free access to DD channels for the poor, particularly in the North-East, Himachal and Kashmir. Earlier, Prasar Bharati had announced that 15000 dishes and set-top-boxes (STBs) required to receive DTH would be distributed to community centres. Since Dish DTH (by Zee TV) has already been a reality in the country for the last eight months, Doordarshan would be a second player. And a third player (Star TV) is knocking at the door. Perhaps, that is why the minister said: "More the merrier."

There is some innocence and misleading belief about these announcements and assumptions. Firstly, DTH, being primarily a hardware effort, involves not Rs 160 crore but much more than Rs 500 crore of investment. Secondly, to receive a DTH service, including DD's, one needs to have a small dish and an STB costing more than Rs 3000. Thirdly, as of now, each DTH service requires a separate dish and a separate STB. Fourthly, DTH implies promoting "Pay TV" and "encrypted channels"

subscribers without being amenable for any interruption. Neither of these facts were brought to the knowledge of Parliament.

DTH has not replaced cable TV anywhere nor has cable TV become absolute anywhere and vice versa. Both will coexist in India very much. With the convergence of technologies, DTH in its present form is not the end or the ultimate. We can expect a newer communication technology which would be cheaper, easier, more relevant, a lot more personalised and interactive in the coming decade, making DTH not absolute but as yet another option like the cable TV today. What one needs to look into are cost-benefit aspects of the cable TV, terrestrial TV, DTH, etc, in the context of the kind of contradictions and diversities we have. It is rather a compulsion for DTH to aim at rich households and those

The media scene cannot be free for all. No country is without restrictions, obligations and regulations. Decisions taken without a broader view and approach, as in the case of DTH, add to the complexity of the issues and, in fact, take the country on a misleading course. What India needs is a more decentralised media where participation is local and from wider sections and does not further divide the country into "DTH-rich" and "DTH-poor". One of the objectives that the government should be concerned about is to bring about one-third of the country's population into the fold of easy media access.

The Prasar Bharati proposal to provide dish and STBs freely or on a subsidised basis to community centres and the like to enable them to receive DD's DTH is an innocent idea. For, it does not draw upon

horizontally and vertically. But so far this facility has not even been launched for whatever reasons. DD-DTH is likely to be a bigger setback for DD than is the case with DTT — at the cost of a few hundred crores of taxpayers' money. In any case, DD's DTH will never be a viable proposition nor would it amount to fulfilling Prasar Bharati's obligations as a "public service broadcaster".

The Ministry of I&B would be performing its responsibilities in a far better manner if it could facilitate and support local terrestrial television stations which are more cost-effective than DTH. This costly mistake of going for DTH could have been avoided in the first instance had there been a national media policy. The government already made a mistake of licensing Dish DTH of Zee.

If the ministry had a national media policy it would not have licensed any private player for DTH and DD should have been the first to come up with DTH. Having more players does not mean better for any such media as the experience of other countries indicates. Studies even on market opportunities in India indicate the same situation.

Instead of such an "exploratory enterprise" of going for DD-DTH, the ministry should first do something with regard to the following: (1) One dish and one STB should be good enough for all DTH services unlike

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There is some innocence and misleading belief about these announcements and assumptions. Firstly, DTH, being primarily a hardware effort, involves not Rs 160 crore but much more than Rs 500 crore of investment. Secondly, to receive a DTH service, including DD's, one needs to have a small dish and an STB costing more than Rs 3000. Thirdly, as of now, each DTH service requires a separate dish and a separate STB. Fourthly, DTH implies promoting "Pay TV" and "encrypted channels" even though some channels on it may be free and thus involves heavy on-going costs at both ends, the broadcaster and the receiver, if it has to remain in service. Fifthly, DTH is a centralised operation with many channels from all over, of all origins, and they could be on any subject.

Sixthly, DTH service gets interrupted wherever and whenever there is rain and clouds at lower altitude (as in the North-East and Himachal) for that period. Seventhly, the viability of a DTH service, in whichever country it exists, is more by going for porno channels and the like. And, lastly, DTH allows targeted messages to targeted

subscribers without being amenable for any interruption. Neither of these facts were brought to the knowledge of Parliament.

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who are already reached practically by every other media of communication and entertainment. It has good potential to reach the so far unreached in far flung and hilly pockets of the country but on other than rainy and cloudy days.

The I&B Ministry has been for some years on a reactive mode in an ad hoc way instead of coming up first with a national media policy or at least with a policy for broadcasting. The urgency for such a national policy is much more today as there are many options with merits, demerits and appropriateness with regard to India's unique communication needs and challenges. Then there are issues like the cross-media pattern and monopolies which need to be addressed to in a national policy, not by way of administrative guidelines in each case.

our earlier experience with "community TV" when channel options were not there. The community TV approach no longer works with more TV households even in remote areas and with the option of many channels. Doordarshan's DTH would end up "introducing" and delivering foreign and private channels more than increasing the viewership for DD channels. The push and pull factor in such viewing situations tends to be in favour of the channels which are not meant to be viewed locally.

The "community radio" scheme should have been revamped first as a priority item as it is far more relevant than DTH, including in remote corners. DD had spent Rs 28 crore during the last couple of years for Digital Territorial Transmission (DTT) in four metros with the potential to expand TV hor-

izontally and vertically. But so far this facility has not even been launched for whatever reasons. DD-DTH is likely to be a bigger setback for DD than is the case with DTT — at the cost of a few hundred crores of tax payers money. In any case, DD's DTH will never be a viable proposition nor would it amount to fulfilling Prasar Bharati's obligations as a "public service broadcaster".

The Ministry of I&B would be performing its responsibilities in a far better manner if it could facilitate and support local terrestrial television stations which are more cost-effective than DTH. This costly mistake of going for DTH could have been avoided in the first instance had there been a national media policy. The government already made a mistake of licensing Dish DTH of Zee.

If the ministry had a national media policy it would not have licensed any private player for DTH and DD should have been the first to come up with DTH. Having more players does not mean better for any such media is the experience of other countries indicates. Studies even on market opportunities in India indicate the same situation.

Instead of such an "exploratory enterprise" of going for DD-DTH, the ministry should first do something with regard to the following: (1) One dish and one STB should be good enough for all DTH services unlike now. (2) All channels, particularly news and current affairs channels, should be made obligatory to be carried on all DTH platforms unlike. (3) More specifically, it should be mandatory for all DTH platforms beaming into India to carry all DD channels, national and regional. This would be far more cost-effective than going in for DD's own DTH platform. It should concentrate on making more relevant and more appealing programmes so that its channels stand out in the new and competitive media scenario. ■

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