

OPINION

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Strengthening the Media



THE STANDING Committee of Parliament on Information Technology in its latest report last week has called for a comprehensive law to regulate the entry and growth of broadcasting services, including DTH, instead of going by guidelines and administrative

orders. It rightly observed that "guidelines cannot be a substitute for a comprehensive legal framework". The committee, in fact deplored how the Government, ignoring the social impact aspect of foreign TV programmes, had allowed DTH.

In this context Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's initiative for a "review of media policy", particularly in the context of "information revolution" and "freedom of competition" is timely. He wanted the policy review keeping in mind the concerns of "social justice" and of all "players in the media sector". The cabinet sub-committee appointed in this context should address itself to a holistic "National Media Policy" based on a coherent view of the mass media instead of continuing with an adhoc and a case by case approach for each media separately. In the process there has been so much indeciveness and inconsistency in government policies towards the broadcasting and the media sector.

Such a policy cannot be expected to do justice without addressing three core issues cutting across the media. These are (a) to do with FDI, not only in "news media" (radio, television, newspapers) but all other media and obligatory conditions that need to go with the license; (b) certain polarization in the pattern of media holdings towards a monopolistic situation, and (c) regarding emerging cross-media operations.

A National Media Policy should help correct the phenomena of "growing mass media, but not

expanding the reach". We need another "tipping effect" similar today to the one the country had witnessed a decade ago with cable TV. The reach of all media put together should go beyond two-thirds of the population. The recent increase and qualitative changes in the media sector were mostly on account of the regional and decentralized media by way of cable TV and regional language newspapers and channels. This process needs to be boosted further.

In the absence of a comprehensive perspective by way of a policy as to the relative priorities of these media, we can hardly expect to make much headway. An appraisal of adhoc decisioning in the last couple of years, including the ones to do with community

grass roots and make it more relevant to the people. National concerns and priorities in this regard have to be unambiguous.

An equally important issue that needs to be addressed as a part of a comprehensive national policy is to do with "viewer-end safeguards" from market driven media operations. The licences to private operators, irrespective of the extent of FDI, cannot be without obligations and responsibilities in the larger and long term interests of viewers. It is rather difficult to understand how a government could have allowed channels to beam to India without even registering in India and adhering to the existing provisions, which are applicable to the Indian media. The government should not look at licensing broadcast-

ing as a source for generating revenue. The National Media Policy should take into account the Supreme Court's landmark judgment of 1995 that "airwaves are public" implying that they cannot be used as it suits for sectional interests. This also implies that the "public service" and "public accountability" aspects should not be limited to a public service broadcaster, but should also apply to every broadcaster, private or public.

TRAI has taken on itself more issues to do with broadcasting as a carriage, is now addressing issues like community radio, FM radio, DTH and in fact, wants to take on even content related issues. The decisions on these can no longer be differed upon or delayed. The cabinet sub-committee also needs to take a view about both the aborted "Broadcast Bill"

of 1997 and the "Convergence Bill" of 2001. Both these proposals had gone through a wide consultation process. The minister's idea of going for an independent commission with a larger mandate merging with or incorporating the role of the Press Council deserves consideration. ■

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