

WHY PUBLIC BROADCASTING?

Prof. Vinod Pavarala

Dean, Sarojini Naidu School of Arts & Communication

University of Hyderabad

Public Service Broadcasting could be distinguished from broadcasting for primarily commercial or political reasons in the sense that it is expected to operate independent of those holding economic and political power. Public systems of broadcasting originated in the second quarter of the 20th century in Western European democracies, with a commitment to operate radio and later television for the greater public good and in public interest. One of the recent policy documents of the European Parliament suggests that PSB is expected to not only provide information, education, and entertainment to the entire society, but also enhance social, political and cultural citizenship. Towards that end, PSB is characterized typically by universal access, editorial autonomy and impartiality, variety of programming, high quality, and public accountability.

It is this kind of broadcasting that is under siege all over the world, and India is no exception, from commercially oriented, profit-driven media. In many countries the audience for public broadcasting services has declined to under a 40% share (in some countries less than 10% share of audience in prime time). The commercial broadcasting model, dominant from the outset in countries like the United States, has increasingly begun to hold sway in nations with mixed broadcasting systems. This model comes packed with the culture of celebrity and seduction—the weight of numbers of viewers, listeners, and readers.

If we feel that in India today public service broadcasting is under serious threat, it is because the last 75 years or so of Indian broadcasting is a story of missed opportunities. The Australian media scholar, Robin Jeffrey is of the opinion that if the implementation of the Prasar Bharati Bill (passed in 1990) had not been delayed for the better part of the 90s, there would have been a wonderful opportunity for shaping AIR and Doordarshan into ‘an attractive trans-national broadcaster’ on the lines of the BBC or Al Jazeera more recently. I will return later to this serious gap between stated intentions and implementation that has marked the history of India’s public broadcasting system.

The terms of discourse on media systems, generally, and on public service broadcasting, more specifically, have undergone a sea-change after the new phase of globalization, liberalization and privatization since the 1990s. The onslaught of capitalist globalization has led to concentration of ownership of the cultural industries in the hands of ever fewer corporate communications conglomerates at every level-production, distribution, regulatory environment, access to globalized markets and the political process. Deregulation and privatization are most visible in the broadcasting sector which in many countries had been maintained by the state as a non-profit, public service. The transition from national public ownership to global private ownership is almost total. As the role of the state declined, transnational medial corporations began to invade domestic markets by entering into collaborative ventures with national media firms to produce, provide, and/or disseminate news and entertainment. Advances in satellite broadcasting and advances in digitization have helped these gigantic media corporations gain a firm foothold over the terms of public debate and discourse. Scholars contend that transnational satellite media are part of the same process of globalization as integration of financial markets. They threaten not just national sovereignty and identity, but the concept of citizenship that goes with it. We are spectators to ‘a leaking away of sovereignty from the state, both upwards to supranational institutions and downwards to sub-national ones’.

One of the social consequences of the globalization of media and communication is that this sector is a leading ‘enabler of globalization’ as information and communication technologies facilitate overall globalization, and media industries spread world wide cultural influences to promote consumerist and individualistic lifestyles. Further the gradual commercialization of media and communications has had a severe impact on “the formation of individual and community identity, cultural and language diversity, the capacity to participate in the political process, the integrity of the public sphere, the availability of information and knowledge in the public domain and the use of media for development, educational and human rights purposes” (Sean Siochru). The critical social functions that media must play in a democratic society are seriously hindered by the global commodification of media outputs that subject media and communication ‘products’ to the general market rules. In the face of this, there is clearly a need to protect and promote public service broadcasting and also explore alternatives

such as community media that would focus on fulfilling social needs and reinforcing human rights.

As media globalization diminishes freedom of information, erodes the diversity and quality of information in the public sphere, civil society becomes increasingly ineffective. This has raised questions about the free flow of information to and from citizens, which is an essential prerequisite if the realm of civil society must include 'organized and substantial capacity for people to enter into public discourse about the nature and course of their lives together' (Craig Calhoun).

According to communication scholar Dennis McQuail the idea of 'public service' broadcasting encompasses eight principles :

Geographical universality of provision and reception; the aim of providing for all tastes and interests; catering for minorities; having a concern for national identity and community; keeping broadcasting independent from government and vested interest; having some element of direct funding from the public (thus not only from the advertisers); encouraging competition in programmes and not just for audiences; and encouraging the freedom of broadcasters (McQuail).

Scholars have pointed out that a public service broadcasting system is evident in either one of two different models. One, a 'trickle-down' national civic model within the ideological context of public service; public discourse, in this model, "trickles down" as the country's public service broadcaster becomes a professional and democratic gatekeeper in the interest of social stability, often implying central control of a select elite over the communication processes. Critics of the ideology of "Trickle-Down" proposed, in its place, a model that could be referred to as the "Bubble-Up" model. This alternative conceptualization assumes that citizens have rights to the greatest possible diversity of personal and social experience and that they also have rights to knowledge and participation. They must be allowed to speak of their own lives in their own voices. They must have access to the means to communicate their experience through public communications media without institutional intervention or gate-keeping (Preston; Himmelstein). This model is epitomized by public access television and community radio.

Radio broadcasting in free India and later television endeavoured to share up in the mould of Public Service Broadcasting. However, state control over broadcasting

ended up following what Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky sketched out as “the propaganda model” where media serve “to mobilize support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity,” becoming a propaganda tool for government policies and actions. With liberalization of the economy in India, broadcasting witnessed backdoor and reluctant privatization, and eventually, forces of commercialization prevailed, leading to a shift towards empty entertainment. As Stephen Barnard points out,

The classical argument against commercialization of mass communication media is that pursuit of advertising revenues encourages programming assumed to appeal to the greatest number, thereby marginalizing less popular tastes and interests. It creates an environment most conducive to reception of advertising message, leading to programming that is undemanding, unchallenging and pacifying (Bernard).

Technology-led globalization of media did not do anything to change the order of things for broadcasting in India. It led to the concentration of ownership in a handful of transnational media conglomerates, further diminishing the freedom and diversity of information. As cultural homogenization became the order of the day, the uniformity of the content rendered meaningless the increase in the number of information sources (Pavarala and Kumar). As a result, the shrinking of democratic spaces has weakened civil society, allowing the market to have unfettered control over the minds of the people.

These concerns have been articulated in several reports of committees set up to examine the status of broadcasting in India and also in numerous policy documents. This brings me back to the gap between intentions and reality that I mentioned earlier. In spite of plainly stated objectives, little has been done to re-orient broadcasting to produce meaningful content that goes beyond rather than emulate practices of commercial broadcasting, and addresses the developmental, social, cultural, communal and democratic imperatives of the country. No effort has been made to ensure that the weakest and the vulnerable are empowered through access and control of media-technologies.

For instances, All India Radio’s 77 Local Radio Stations (LRS) were mandated to produce field-based programmes with accent on local problems, news and views, and local talent. The organization’s annual report states :

What distinguishes Local Radio....is its down to earth, intimate approach. The programmes of the local radio are area specific. They are flexible and spontaneous enough to enable the station to function as the mouth piece of the local community (Prasar Bharati, 2002).

In reality, however, owing to inherent deficiencies of a bureaucratic system these stations only replicate the style of working and even the programming patterns of larger stations. Their staff is ill-equipped to run them in a manner that is democratic and participatory. Even as the well-intentioned public broadcaster is frozen into inaction, commercial broadcasting has revived a plummeting medium. But the latter's agenda to accumulate profits renders it incapable of exploiting the potential of the medium for promoting either good taste or propagating social change. This has propelled a number of civil society organizations to articulate the need for alternatives in the form of popular and community-based media. The community radio initiatives by several groups across India for a share of the airwaves, which are 'public property', are one significant indication of this popular demand.

An attempt to revitalize the role of Prasar Bharati as a public service broadcaster was made by setting up of the Prasar Bharati Review Committee¹ that submitted its report on May 20, 2000. The Committee was of the opinion that :

The public service broadcaster plays a key role in any society, especially, in a large and thriving democracy. It must be a part of 'civil society', independent of and distinct from the government. In fact, the public service broadcaster must act as one of the bedrocks of society, and seek to continuously enlarge the so-called 'public sphere'. It must play host to informed debate, provide space for alternative and dissenting viewpoints, be a voice of the voiceless and give substance to the phrase "participatory democracy" (MIB, 2000).

¹ Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India constituted a Committee on November 22, 1999 comprising N.R.Narayanamurthy, Chairman & Chief Executive, Infosys; Kiran Karnik, Managing Director, Discovery Communications India; Shunu, Chairman & Chief Executive, Quadra Advisory, Marketing Consultant; R.C.Mishra, Jt. Secretary (Broadcasting, Ministry of I&B); Rajeeva Ratna Shah, Chief Executive, Prasar Bharati, Special Invitee; to carry out a comprehensive review of Prasar Bharati.

The Committee reiterated that market forces cannot be expected to take care of these objectives and for Prasar Bharati, as the public broadcaster, revenue maximization need not be an immediate goal and advertising revenue earned should not be the only yardstick for judging its performance. The Committee suggested several amendments to the Prasar Bharati Act 1990 to enable it to survive in a highly competitive environment created by global media technology and to create public service content to the highest quality. The Committee reiterated its faith in decentralization and devolution and emphasized that the local stations must involve local groups and voluntary organizations in programme production. It also recommended giving serious consideration to :

....the franchising of local radio stations by Prasar Bharati to selected local community and voluntary groups on an experimental basis. Now the FM radio has been privatized, we do hope that the long-standing opposition and aversion to such a worthwhile step will fade away (MIB, 2000a: 37).

The broadcasting debate assumed an altogether new dimension with the advent of cable operators and the beaming of satellite channels by Hong Kong –based STAR TV into India in the year 1991. Conditions for broadcasting changed radically (Pavarala and Kumar). Faced with the eventuality of private sector competition, autonomy, genuine or otherwise, for state-owned media seemed inevitable. At the same time, the governments were faced with a new set of questions, which they were quite ill equipped to resolve. What should be the structure of regulatory system to take account of the invasion via satellites, and of the new media technologies? What was to be the fate of national (read political) objectives? Competition in programming as well as commerce or advertising was another unfamiliar territory. All these concerns coupled with a few other landmark developments saw the revival of some of the critical issues concerning broadcasting in India after three decades of unimplemented good intentions.

In the face of such challenges, the strategy of the government as well as that of the so-called autonomous corporation, Prasar Bharati can at best be described as ‘muddling through’. Competition with commercial media outlets to ‘dumb down’ content in search of advertising revenues and reduction in the variety and genres of public broadcasting for audience numbers have been combined with protestations over its public character and national mission. There is little doubt that today there is an urgent need to strengthen, rather than weaken, public service broadcasting. This project of revival and

reinforcement could include a combination of both the 'trickle-down' and the 'bubble-up' models. Its conventional programming, through appropriate gatekeeping by an independent authority, could continue to emphasize national issues and a sense of national purpose, reinforce solidarity in times of political and/or economic crisis, and stress tolerance of diversity. At the same time, the public service broadcaster could assume a role in fostering local community communications, highlight local opinion and local opinion leaders, and advocate and foster social and cultural development of the local community. Although this latter space is now occupied substantially by community radio, the public broadcaster has a rightful role to play in this arena.

Finally, let me end by invoking the BBC, which had claimed that as a public broadcasting service, it contributes to public value by promoting : democratic value, cultural and creative value, educational value, and social and community value. In the contemporary context of media proliferation – 'the era of plenty' – Prasar Bharati cannot entirely conceive of itself as a dominant institutional voice imposing consensus. It must work through new possibilities of consensus by exploring diversity. In rethinking its mission, Prasar Bharati must not only foster good practices of the 'old electronic media, but also take advantage of the interactive technological potential of new media. But that could be the topic for another discussion.