

## Don't let Doordarshan die

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Competition can help DD improve its content.

*Doordarshan may be a white elephant, but can be turned around on the lines of the BBC.*

From just one channel, to over 700 channels, the Indian TV industry has come a long way. With 150 million households having TVs, India is the third largest market in the world after China and the US. During this unprecedented growth, Doordarshan has dramatically lost viewership, thanks to the satellite TV boom.

Although Doordarshan has achieved over 90 per cent reach in the country, it is not the preferred channel for people across the country who have a choice of channels. The story of AIR is no different. Private radio channels have been able to attract listeners quite effortlessly.

Such a phenomenon is not limited to DD/AIR. If we look at other fields that have witnessed private participation after Government monopoly, Government organisations like BSNL or Indian Airlines have miserably failed to retain their customer base, due to their lackadaisical attitude. It is a matter of survival for the private players, and hence they are competitive.

The recent news that Information and Broadcasting Minister has set up a committee under Sam Pitroda to suggest improvements in Prasar Bharati (which controls Doordarshan and AIR) is good to hear.

But recommendations of various committees in the past have yielded no result. What will change now? Can DD embrace the much-talked-about BBC model?

### **BBC Model**

Globally, there are over 30 public service broadcasters (PSB), and most of them have built trust value with the public. The most popular PSB is undoubtedly BBC. In fact, UK is credited with pioneering the “arm’s length” relationship between the State and the public broadcaster. The BBC is autonomous and enjoys sufficient independence, preventing political or bureaucratic interference to a large extent. No wonder, BBC News has been the most trusted news source in the UK and across the globe.

Every TV owner in UK pays an annual licence fee. (This is much like the radio licence fee that existed in India long back). This fee is the main source of income for BBC as a PSB. In other parts of the world, PSBs are funded through a mix of licence fees, Government grants and advertisements.

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BBC has managed to always stay ahead of competition through technology leadership. The latest financial report shows that over 70 per cent of the licence fee was spent directly on programmes, or the property and technology infrastructure to support their production.

BBC strives to deliver “value-for-money” to its audience through distinctive, high quality programmes. BBC’s PSB supports multiple national and regional TV channels/radio stations and an extensive website. BBC’s ability to provide innovative and distinctive content helps attract audience across age groups. For example CBBC and CBeebies, the flagship children’s channels are extremely popular even outside the UK. In addition to the public broadcasting channel, BBC has other channels that have different revenue streams.

## Quality content

With this background, it looks like an overwhelming task to get DD anywhere close to BBC. However, with the right structural reforms which can reduce Government interference, there certainly is still hope.

It is shocking that DD has not learnt from other global PSBs who have managed to stay competitive in the presence of private players.

It is evident that DD lacks in-depth understanding of the changing market dynamics. This is the age of infotainment where information and entertainment are seamlessly integrated to attract audiences.

DD must focus on building trust with the people. It is not an easy task and may take several years. This would include some serious and sustained effort in creating high quality content that can connect with the public. This, coupled with strong marketing effort, is urgently needed. In addition, it is imperative that the DD re-skills existing employees and/or acquires the right talent.

Production quality must be improved with investment in infrastructure and technology. Why can’t DD tie-up with the best production houses in the country? Can DD champion mobile TV in India? DD’s presence in Internet and social media is absolutely miserable. But without good quality content, social media will be of limited use.

PSBs like DD have to fulfil social responsibilities, including strengthening national identity and culture.

DD conveniently ignores any comparison with private players due to the PSB tag. People look for entertainment value and the name of broadcaster hardly matters. Right now, even private channels are struggling to differentiate themselves from each other.

Can DD come up with a fresh idea by leveraging its exclusive access in Government offices and unmatched rich archives? DD can make a huge impact in the education segment. Although the idea behind UGC’s education programmes must be lauded, it failed to resonate among students due to below-par implementation.

Perhaps, DD could join hands with private players and provide creative programmes around education, career counselling, skill enhancements or language classes. How about coaching classes for IIT JEE or infotainment programmes for the agriculture sector? Regular audience feedback on the lines of BBC’s Appreciation Index (AI) score is absolutely essential.

## Create alternate PSB

Reports suggest that the government spends close to ₹ 1,800 crore annually on Doordarshan, but DD’s revenue is about ₹ 1,000 crore.

Where is the accountability? As long as Government funds DD, there is hardly any motivation for DD to be competitive or profitable.

The Government should gradually reduce funding and ask DD to come up with innovate ways of revenue generation.

Should the Government start charging a licence fee from TV owners? That’s the easy option. But why should public pay for mediocre content? Instead, Can DD should start a commercial channel that can compete with private players?

This should, in turn, fund public service broadcasting. Can DD become a navratna company by 2020? The other option is to create competition to DD by allowing another PSB in India. Some aggressive targets are needed for reviving this white elephant.

DD has a long way to go before it can emulate the BBC model. While we wait for Sam Pitroda committee’s recommendation with interest, the Government’s willingness to implement the recommendations will be the key. For a change, let’s hope the Government will surprise us with action.

(The author is Vice-President at Symphony Teleca. The views are personal.)

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