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How do you solve a problem like Doordarshan?

If Prasar Bharati has to become relevant again, it needs autonomy. But no government wants to let the country's official television and radio become independent

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In the games being played out this election, it is a sideshow. But last week's ruckus over the alleged selective editing of an interview of Bharatiya Janata Party prime ministerial candidate [Narendra Modi](#) by [Doordarshan](#) highlights one of the weakest links in democratic debates in India - a robust news [media](#) not pressured by favour, fear or finance. Modi spoke about Doordarshan's struggle to maintain its freedom, while Jawhar Sircar, Prasar Bharati's loquacious CEO, talked about autonomy. Manish Tewari, the minister for information and broadcasting (I&B), said that the government keeps an arms' length distance from Doordarshan. None of them are stating the complete facts.

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The independence of the [Prasar Bharati](#) Corporation, the body that runs [Doordarshan](#) and [All India Radio](#) and deemed to be 'autonomous', is often talked of as a joke. It has the best assets in the Rs 42,000-crore television industry today. However, it is not allowed to hire people or fire them and it cannot leverage its assets to raise money without the approval of the I&B ministry. In fact, it does not even own its assets, including 1,400 transmission towers, spectrum and real estate, because no government ever formally transferred them to the corporation after enacting the legislation to create it in 1997. It remains abjectly dependent

on government dole - either as budgetary support or as advertising. A quick read through the Sam Pitroda Committee's report on Prasar Bharati, submitted earlier this year, will tell you that and more in gory detail.

The Pitroda panel's report is the fourth in just over a decade to list the issues and solutions to get [Prasar Bharati](#) out of the mire. Among these is delinking it administratively and financially from the government, and deciding without ambiguity whether it should be a strong competitor to private broadcasters in the world's second largest television market or a world-class public service broadcaster. This is where the platitudes of politicians ring false.

Every government, irrespective of the party in power, has treated [Doordarshan](#) as an in-house mouthpiece meant to be controlled. They have studiously ignored all talk of financial and administrative autonomy. [Media](#) writer Amberish K Diwanji says, for example, that during the National Democratic Alliance's regime, the then I&B minister Pramod Mahajan had transferred a station director for not leading the evening news with prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's address earlier in the day. That explains why every experiment to have independent news reporting or better entertainment on India's official broadcast network has flopped so far. Remember the failed agreement with HFCL-Nine Broadcasting to privatise three hours of programming on DD Metro, a subsidiary channel, in 2000? Or even the DD Metro experiment itself?

TIME TO SHED THE FLAB?			PRASAR BHARTI: BLEEDING FOR LONG <small>(All figures in ₹ crore)</small>				
Company	Revenues FY 2013 (₹ crore)	Employees	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	
Star India	6,100	1,400					
Zee	6,350	8,000					
Prasar Bharati	1,553	31,621					
NDTV	552	1,250					
MCCS*	250	700					
			Incomes from sales	1,001.6	1,174.2	1,192	1,553
			Grants, subsidies	1,169.3	1517.7	1269.8	1,700
			Total expenditure	2,303	2,883	2,749	3,200
			Deficit	na	945	925	na

Note: The Prasar Bharati figure includes only full-time employees. There are an additional 7,279 part-time employees too; * Media Content & Communication Services

The latest fracas is yet another example of resistance from within and outside to Sircar's attempts to professionalise

the news section. He had brought in several external advisors such as Pranjal Sharma, Meenkashi Menon and Ajai Shukla (who is a columnist with this paper) to help [Doordarshan](#) get out of its morass. Shukla, who was anchoring *DD NewsNight*, quit within six months after a circular stated that all guests on news shows had to be approved by the director-general or additional director-general of news. For a new team trying to raise the quality of discussions by involving all political parties, including the opposition, in debates of national importance, this was a death blow.

"The system rose up against him (Sircar)," says Sharma, who quit in March this year. Like the others, Sharma, who was executive editor of Bloomberg UTV, had been roped in as an advisor on new media, programming and strategy among other things.

"Everyone thinks, give them autonomy and everything will be alright. But even if you did, [Doordarshan](#) employees have been government officers all their life, so they won't change. Besides you don't even need autonomy to do the stuff needed to get [Doordarshan](#) out of the rut," says Sevanti Ninan, [media](#) researcher and editor of *The Heat*. With or without autonomy, the official channel looks irrelevant in the television market in India

today and that is what needs to be fixed first.

[Doordarshan](#) reaches all of India's 153 million TV homes thanks to a law that mandates its carriage across cable and DTH homes. It gets mandatory sports feeds from private broadcasters. And it gets anywhere between Rs 1,200 crore and Rs 1,500 crore of taxpayers' money as subsidy every year. Yet, it made a loss of Rs 925 crore in March 2012 and has accumulated losses of over Rs 13,500 crore. It is a loss that taxpayers would be happy to bear if what they got was closer to the fare churned out by Britain's BBC, which is also run on taxpayers' money.

This brings us to the first of the three problems that dog Doordarshan. [Prasar Bharati](#) invests less than 15 per cent of its expenditure every year on content, compared with the 60-70 per cent for global public service broadcasters or the 40-50 per cent for private broadcasters in India. Not surprisingly, Doordarshan's programming is hopelessly outdated, forcing even dedicated viewers in rural strongholds to migrate to cable TV or free DTH, offered ironically by Doordarshan. There are now just about 10 million terrestrial homes in the country, ones that get only [Doordarshan](#) programmes.

In a vibrant, growing and profitable market, it seems a little excessive to have 33 channels, 67 studios, more than 1,400 transmitters and 31,621 people to service just 10 million homes. In comparison, the Zee Group, with assets in cable, DTH and broadcasting, has 8,000 employees and generates over Rs 6,350 crore in revenues. [Prasar Bharati](#) has four times the number of employees that Zee does and generates one-fourth the revenues.

In addition to over 31,000 full-time employees, [Prasar Bharati](#) also hires 7,200-odd part-time workers. That is the second problem with Prasar Bharati. It is overstaffed with the wrong people. Going by the figures in the Pitroda report, almost 45 per cent of the gargantuan staff is in the engineering department which dominates thinking and strategy, followed by 37 per cent in the administrative support services. Programming accounts for only 19 per cent of its staff. This shortage is met by outsourcing about 80 per cent of Doordarshan's content needs and 20 per cent of All India Radio's. In effect, you have a company with state-of-the-art production facilities that are hardly utilised. For example, it is routine for DD National to not even share idle cameras with DD News.

"Most of the people in [Prasar Bharati](#) and its units do not have broadcasting experience and they are unwilling to change. Many of these things can be sorted if a smart bunch of people get together," says Sharma. And that is the third issue. Every attempt to fix these problems is routinely blocked. This is because the [Prasar Bharati Act](#) makes the corporation completely beholden to the government. For examples Section 32 of the Act gives the central government powers to make rules on the salaries and allowances of employees. And while they were to be transferred to Prasar Bharati, the staff of Doodarshan and [All India Radio](#) continue to be government servants.

The way out is very clear - cut staff, redeploy assets to raise money and cut the umbilical cord with the government. The Pitroda Committee suggests moving [Doordarshan](#) completely to satellite distribution as a way out. DD's Freedish, a free DTH service from Prasar Bharati, offers 59 free-to-air channels such as Star Utsav and Zee Anmol. It is the largest DTH operator in the country reaching 18 million homes. The switch to satellite will save [Prasar Bharati](#) Rs 635 crore in operating costs annually and a notional saving of Rs 1,294 crore that was planned for upgrading the terrestrial system. In addition, it will free up of spectrum and other assets such as real estate, says the report.

and like a sensible idea except for one thing - nobody is watching DD on terrestrial connections or on cable

and satellite. As Ninan puts it; "No committee matters except the fact that you have lost your audience." If [Doordarshan](#) wants to be relevant again, it first needs to get back its audience. And for that it needs autonomy. There we go again...

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