

Indian pubcaster needs to re-invent in era of digital advancement

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MUMBAI: While the general consensus on the role of a public service broadcaster (pubcaster) is that it provides not much “newsy” content, the BBC definitely remains a role model, even for private news channels.

This was the underlying theme that was discussed on a panel discussion titled 'India 2015: Role of the Public Service Broadcaster and Lessons from

the World' at FICCI Frames 2015.

The panel comprised Prasar Bharati CEO Jawhar Sircar, BBC Global News CEO Jim Egan, ABU secretary general Javad Mottaghi and VGTRK Digital Television Russia deputy CEO Ayuna Badmaeva. The session was moderated by Zee Network's *The Appointment* host and FICCI advisor Pranjal Sharma.

The session began with Sircar speaking on the role of Prasar Bharati in the country so far. According to him, the pubcaster had been able to streamline the entire country's emotional unity together in a multi culture nation. It also played the heritage aspect role as it broadcast mythological shows like the *Ramayana*. “Show me a single broadcaster, who covers every island of the country across its

geographical spectrum. India's cultural unity was achieved because of a public service broadcaster," he emphasised.

Elaborating on how her network functions in Russia and on its role, Badmaeva informed that the network had 18 brands under its umbrella. "We started in 2009 with a factual entertainment channel. We work across Russia and our role is to fill the gap where other networks do not cover its citizens," she said.

Egan added, "What is most important for a public service broadcaster is to make the good popular and make the popular good. It is very important that a pubcaster reaches out to every citizen."

Posing a question, Sharma asked whether the government should decide what's good for the public? Mottaghi replied saying that the first word "public" of Public Service Broadcaster referred to all groups of society. Hence its duty was to serve the public. "It has to be public oriented content versus commercial oriented content. We talk about issues such as health, culture, education and what society needs, which is not so much part of commercial news channels," he opined.

On being questioned by Sharma as to how Doordarshan ensures that it gets viewers to watch its content, Sircar conceded the fact that DD's content was definitely not at par as compared to what the BBC was known for world over.

For Sircar, the issue was related to both creativity and funding. "If the BBC could use 75 per cent of its funding on content, India could use only 10 per cent," he said.

Throwing an insightful statistic, which governed the theme of the discussion that followed, Sircar said, "While internationally, double digits dollars were spent per person for creating content. However, in India only 40 cents per person is spent on creating content. If you spend 40 cents, you get content worth 40 cents too."

Badmaeva then spoke on how the pubcaster tried remaining relevant in Russia in the ever-evolving digital age. She said, "While linear TV ratings are going down, people consumed content via smartphones and tablets. People also bought their

content from cable operators. For us, our network is driven by both profit and reach.” She went on to add the Russian pubcaster has in recent time produced a documentary, which delivered the same rating as the Winter Olympics.

Egan informed on how the BBC stayed relevant in a dynamic media space. “Every household is driven by a \$20 subscription. The idea is about universality. While a part of it to remain relevant is about content, it is also about access, technology and reach. We innovate based on demand. In the digital age, it is how audiences engages with the content,” he said. He then added that around 270 million of the BBC’s audiences was out of the United Kingdom.

Speaking on the now banned documentary India’s Daughter, which was a joint co-production between various production houses and the BBC, Egan said, “It had the highest values of journalism and the challenge is to avoid being ghettotised as just a pubcaster.”

Sircar added that DD Sahayadri too had much of its content produced by private production houses. “Own it, don’t stone it,” he said. He also mentioned that when the pubcaster decided to air the Aamir Khan-helmed show Satyamev Jayate, he was questioned by ministers if a show where people washed their dirty linen in public was good for the channel. Sircar was of the opinion that because the show touched public issues, the pubcaster should air it.

Touching upon the case of Star Sports, which went to court over the pubcaster airing the ICC Cricket World Cup, Sircar said that the pubcaster just followed a court order, which stated that in addition to profit making, the people of India are to be allowed to watch games via cable through terrestrial means. “Because of a very small cartel, which has a few channels, it will lead to monopolising of sports events,” he highlighted.

Sircar informed that his goal was now focussed on two things. Firstly, increasing the number of channels on Free Dish from the current 50 to 112 and secondly, to use DD’s 1400 transmitters to create FM bands. “If FM has to reach mobiles, smaller circles of 50 kilometers will be created,” he said.

He went on to add that a process was underway where 15 out of 20 channels could be auctioned. However, he refused to share details.

Touching upon Sircar's "40 cent" remark, Egan concluded the session saying, "In a country like India with a large population, 40 cents could add up to \$500 million a year. It is a question about a national strategic choice. In some countries a pubcaster would weep tears of joy with this amount of money."