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Notes on the World's Largest Democracy

# Can Doordarshan's New Look Attract Profits?

By **Raksha Kumar** February 22, 2013 3:57 am

After it became the first TV channel in India in 1959, the public broadcaster Doordarshan enjoyed a monopoly on viewership for decades. Even after the government opened the airwaves to private players in 1992, Doordarshan enjoyed a 90 percent share of the audience in the 1990s and had no reason to take the threat of competition seriously.

Twenty years later, its rivals have not only caught up, but they have surpassed Doordarshan in terms of revenue. In the late 1990s, advertisers began to see Doordarshan, which dominates coverage in rural areas, as catering to only the lowest socioeconomic classes, and the public broadcaster slipped even further after an accounting scandal. Since then, Doordarshan has never turned a profit, and some media industry observers have even declared Doordarshan dead.

But Jawhar Sircar, chief executive of Prasar Bharati, the autonomous organization that includes Doordarshan and All India Radio, is betting that a complete overhaul of its TV programs, in both format and content, will draw the viewers that Doordarshan has lost to private satellite channels.

There is only one formula for success, said Mr. Sircar: "You bring out a good product, spend money, put in taste, autonomy and the right professionals, you will get the right product. You have the right product, you will get the right revenues," he said.

Revenues are sorely needed at the government-financed broadcaster. According to the last five-year Broadcast Plan, which ended in March 2012, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting spent 122 billion rupees (\$2.2 billion) of taxpayers' money to run Prasar Bharti, which generated only 60 billion rupees

in revenue over the same period. That means a loss of 62 billion rupees, or more than \$1 billion, over the five years.

Prasar Bharti accounts for about 60 percent of Ministry of Information and Broadcasting's budget, and Doordarshan takes about half that amount, raising the rest of the money it needs through advertising.

Reliable data on Doordarshan's viewership is difficult to find because the company that reports ratings, Television Audience Measurement, covers only satellite channels, and Doordarshan's network, which now has 37 channels and four affiliated channels, is largely terrestrial. Doordarshan has sued Television Audience Measurement, accusing it of under-reporting its audience and costing the broadcaster advertising revenue.

The biggest move for Mr. Sircar, who took over in March 2012, was to push aside the appointed bureaucrats who ran operations even though they had no media experience. For the first time in its history, Doordarshan's news channel, known as DD News, has hired several news professionals who have worked with CNN, Bloomberg and BBC for its board. DD News also poached top anchors at major Indian channels like NDTV and Times Now.

"This new team is one of the best DD has ever seen," said Rajiv Mehrotra, managing trustee of the nonprofit Public Service Broadcasting Trust, referring to Doordarshan. "They have ensured that Prasar Bharati, especially DD, is breathing again."

The main focus of the makeover is Doordarshan's prime-time news program, "News Night," which now tackles controversial topics – a marked change at a network that has been criticized for allowing the government to shape its media coverage in the past. The last time Doordarshan went through an overhaul was in 2003, a year before the national elections, and the Bharatiya Janata Party-controlled central government ordered Doordarshan to downplay certain events, like the deadly 2002 riots in Gujarat, a B.J.P. stronghold.

"DD News has always been known for dry reporting on government affairs," said Paranjoy Guha Thakurta, an independent journalist who has worked with the public broadcaster.

On Wednesday night, DD News officially introduced its retooled show with a discussion on the state of the Indian TV news media and the role a public broadcaster should play, led by anchors already well known for their work at other channels, which lent the program a gravitas that had been missing when newsreaders used to present the news.

Given that this latest revamp also comes a year before national elections, many in the media industry are closely watching Doordarshan for any evidence of government meddling. Manish Tiwari, the information and broadcasting minister, promised at a news conference earlier this month that “this time, the government would keep an arm’s length from content and presentation of DD.”

But Rajiv Mehrotra, a longtime TV producer for Doordarshan, said Prasar Bharati’s “identity crisis” may limit the scope of the new changes.

“Prasar Bharati has to stay on the right side of the government as it gets a substantial monetary help from them, and it cannot go whole hog like the privately owned channels do,” he added.

Next in line for a makeover is the early morning show, with sharper reporting and market analysis planned, and then DD National, the entertainment channel, and DD Urdu.

On the technical side, Doordarshan will change from analog to digital transmitters, which will allow for enhanced picture quality, spectrum efficiency and multichannel transmission from a single transmitter. Other technological changes will allow Doordarshan to split screens so that more than one person can be shown on air, something private news channels have long been able to do.

Mr. Sircar also put the network’s outside broadcasting vans to use so that reporters could do live reports outside the studio. “We never used our O.B. vans. It was such a waste of our resources,” he said.

DD News is also getting a new, more polished look. At his office in New Delhi, Mr. Sircar pointed at two large TV screens, which displayed the new DD News format on one screen and an NDTV 24×7 format on the other. Both screens had four boxes with an expert in each one discussing swine flu in Delhi.

“See the similarity?” he asked. “There used to be a miserable green board behind a sleepy anchor on DD News before. We have changed the color scheme to make it in tune with the younger generation.”

While there may be a similarity in form and presentation between the private channels and DD News, there will never be a similarity in content, pledged Mr. Sircar. “We will stick to the ideals of public service broadcasting and never sensationalize news,” he said.

In the current five-year Broadcast Plan, which ends in March 2017, the government has agreed to raise the amount it gives Prasar Bharati to 132 billion rupees. Whether its faith in Mr. Sircar is rewarded, however, is uncertain.

“Now is the time,” said Mr. Thakurta, the independent journalist. “DD can become the Indian version of the BBC or Al Jazeera or just a mouthpiece of those in authority. Only time will tell.”

***Correction: February 22, 2013***

*"An earlier version of this article misstated the year of the Gujarat riots, which happened in 2002, not 2003. "*