

## **TRP MANIPULATION AND TV CHANNELS PROPAGATING HATE ARE TWO DIFFERENT PROBLEMS**

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Pandora appears to have been waiting for the public statement made recently by the police commissioner of Mumbai to open her dainty box and let out confusion, wrapped in highly-charged emotions.

The claim that some television channels were caught red-handed bribing households to raise their television rating points (TRP) was met with howls of approval from the rest of the media and an exasperated public and, of course, equally cacophonous protests from those accused of manipulation. Interestingly, almost the entire TV news industry appears to have united as never before against this reported malpractice. In this bedlam, major issues are, however, getting mixed up and while scores are being settled, the unprecedented nationwide interest, alarm and angst should call for some positive course-correction.

After all, the matter involves not only the Rs 27,000 crore of revenue that TV channels garner from advertisers and product sellers, it also affects the more critical phenomenon of agenda-based television controlling public tastes and views. The exaggerated sensation that some channels whipped up in the last few weeks to transform an otherwise simple case of a star's death by suicide and his alleged use of drugs and anti-depressants that held audiences in almost hypnotic control is very worrisome. It also revealed an extraordinary level of both toxicity and a dangerously unbalanced spirit of revenge.

Even those who have been critical of the manner in which some determined television heads have deliberately and systematically been injecting malignancy were taken aback by the Sushant Singh Rajput coverage. The sheer depth to which the discourse was dragged over the unfortunate death of 'SSR' is certainly shocking. It is openly said that the current regime had been encouraging a highly-supportive TV channel to divert public attention from more critical national issues.

Measuring TV channels' popularity

Returning to TRPs, we find that these ratings are important mainly to those who pump money into commercial advertisements on TV as they need to ascertain who and how many are likely to be watching the various channels. Rating systems exist the world over, though sampling methodologies adopted differ according to their traditions and other historical factors.

The UK has its Broadcasting Audience Rating Board – whose name the Indian TV audience measurement body, the Broadcasting Audience Rating Council (BARC), copied though not its methodology. France was shocked to learn some time ago that the anonymity of its television rating platform may have been breached a bit. The US is dominated by a private company, Nielsen, that covers some 80,000 households with its measuring devices, but as families are smaller there, the total number of viewers tracked would be considerably less than two lakh. India's BARC has set up 44,000 bar-o-meters in selected television

households to calibrate the choices of some two lakh viewers because family sizes here are larger. Under the TAM rating system that dominated the television scene prior to BARC's arrival in 2015, the number of people-meters was only 8,000 for all of India.

A constant criticism against BARC is that 44,000 meters can hardly claim to represent the views of nearly 20 crore television households. True, very true, though all sample surveys have similar limitations. BARC had been tasked by the government to instal 55,000 meters by 2021 while the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) had recommended that the sample size be increased to 60,000 by now and to 100,000 by the end of 2022. One may still argue that a few thousand additional meters may not make much of a difference as the sampling size still remains small when compared to the mammoth 'universe'. But then, sampling is all about getting the right feel from relatively smaller numbers based on sound statistical principles and honest execution.

BARC's board, consisting of representatives from the television and advertising industry, may like to explain why it is trailing in this task of expanding the sampling base. One response that we can anticipate is that this requires a lot of funding and, if serious, the government could perhaps chip in here. At this point, it is worth noting that BARC has reportedly been successful in lowering the cost of these meters that are now made in India. Foreign suppliers had initially demanded some Rs 1.5 lakh per meter, but after BARC's indigenisation programme, the current costs are a tenth of this price.

We may also note that the sample households are selected through an 'establishment survey' of three lakh TV households that BARC conducts every few years. It is based on agreed socio-economic and other important criteria, and the selection processes are carried out by computers. This then becomes the 'base' from which the 44,000 households are selected again by the computer, for installing meters. Within these TV households each member of the family is given a separate code to distinguish her or his programme selection, which is recorded separately – for presenting more granular data.

### Subverting the system

BARC is mandated to follow quite strict professional standards that are monitored by industry representatives from TV channels (with all their rivalries), advertising agencies, big advertisers and established statisticians. Besides, one-third of selected households are changed every year to avoid vested interests from accruing.

This is all about the safeguards in position but despite all this, even the best of systems have been tampered with in the past. The weakest links in the chain appear to be the outsourced agencies that BARC employs to physically install the meters in selected households. This is the 'human factor' that has a certain element of malleability at all times. Though absolute secrecy is maintained and information is so sliced up that the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing, human craftiness can and has beaten many foolproof systems in the past.

The Mumbai Police is saying exactly this – that former employees of the agency that set up the bar-o-meters in households on behalf of BARC played foul at this 'last mile human interface' level. They were apparently caught paying some households (we don't fully know how many) to turn their meters on so that some channels were falsely given higher viewership or TRP ratings. It thus appears that some delivery boys messed it all up at the

doorstep – for petty gains, despite checks and balances. So far, there is no pointer in the public domain that BARC's core system has been penetrated but it is too early to say whether others were involved and how deep the termites bit their way in.

What we just called 'petty gains' refers to the bribed households (if this can be established), but these 'gains' may not be all that petty for the channels. If they could rig a critical number of metered households, sufficient to tip the scales, they could reap substantial illegitimate benefits. We have to wait, therefore, to see how many metered households actually betrayed their secrecy and trust.

To understand how many of the 44,000 meters have to be spiked to tamper with that TV segment's TRP, let us see how viewership patterns emerge from different segments of television.

Where an accused high-profile TV channel is concerned, it is only the 'English news' genre that we need to look at. It may surprise many to learn that English news constitutes a very minuscule audience – only 0.02% of all the 80 crore or so television viewers of India. The last estimate is that English news TV received some 1.2 crore impressions, which is actually 0.03% of the total TV impressions but it cornered 1.2% of television revenues, because this segment has greater purchasing power. To compare numbers, we find that Hindi film channels scoop 10% of TV revenues and Hindi news channels get some 6%.

Someone rants against the 'Lutyens Delhi gang', because the English-speaking class has surely more political clout than what its size reflects. But this once-reserved fortress of secular liberals appears to have been breached and it is now critical for a pro-regime English news TV channel to retain and expand its influence among the English speaking non-liberals. The important point is that this segment needs a much smaller number of viewers to display a TRP swing in favour of one channel. A scam that cuts through the entire nation appears very difficult to execute without either connivance on a super-gigantic scale or a hue and cry within the dispensation where hawk eyes watch each tilt. The architecture of BARC's analytics is also supposed to have 'filters' which trigger red signals if any unusually high or low numbers emerge for a particular programme in a segment.

In the past too, tampering with some TRP meters was discovered by BARC and police complaints had been lodged. But the concerned police stations or departments did not go hammer and tongs, as they appear to be doing now. If exemplary punishments had been meted out then, we may not have faced the scam that is being highlighted at present.

A problem that has often been mentioned by investigating agencies is that there is no specific legal provision that declared this sort of an offence a criminal one. Even so, the police can cobble up a patchwork of sections under the Indian Penal Code but it usually takes more than that to convince courts, unless they are in a very indulgent mood.

The poison on the silver screen

Two distinct issues emerge out of this. The first is that the law on media needs to be re-examined, while the second is about how we can check increasing toxicity in the media. In fact, many people who are protesting against against the TRP scam may actually be more bothered about poison on the silver screen.

But we need to be cautious about the law covering broadcasting in India, if not the law for the entire media, even though it is screaming for attention. The reason is that we are in a dangerous phase where democracy and rights are concerned, and all twists and turns are being utilised by a genetically-domineering and partly-paranoid regime to increase its stranglehold over every aspect of the life of its citizens.

In a recent case when the Supreme Court wanted government to regulate hate programmes on television, the information and broadcasting ministry turned it all around and proposed that regulation should begin with digital media. It was not only desirous of controlling this largely unregulated area, but online journals that now represent the last line of defence of an embattled and bruised liberal democracy were surely in the regime's mind as next targets – when it sought to twist the court's advisory to suit its hegemonic advances.

The other problem of controlling malevolent television programmes also requires careful handling, even though it has finally and mercifully evoked a public outcry after the Mumbai police started this case. Much of the present condemnation of television malpractices is actually directed at noxious television programmes that reached a historic nadir after the SSR case. It was surely convenient to distract people's attention away from the devastating and unprecedented economic mis-management, the Centre's unsatisfactory COVID-19 control measures and the reported incursions made by China at Ladakh. But genuflecting before a regime certainly does not warrant poisoning the television viewing population at large.

Once the police cases in Mumbai and the due process of law establish the truth about 'bribed ratings', BARC would need to amend its processes and also expand its sampling base to re-instil public confidence. After all, the requirements of television advertising revenues cannot supersede the sentiments of the people of India.

While the law on media surely requires a serious overhaul, we should also guard against an ever-encroaching state. If the regime is at all bent on action, it could very well begin with two small but extremely urgent pieces of legislation. One could declare 'rigging' of TRPs a criminal offence, thus filling in a critical gap, and the other could control venomous hate programmes on television. These are pious hopes given the institutionalisation of hate that has been carried out systematically in the past six years, but civil society could very well propose these as takeaways from the current crisis gripping TRPs.

An improved rating system is surely better than no ratings at all or any subjective assessment. In fact, if the present public disgust and industry's apprehensions lead to these options, the well-organised manipulators of public opinion would simply slaughter the more vulnerable liberal media.