

TRP SCAM PROVES THE BEST OF TECHNOLOGY AND SYSTEMS CAN BE COMPROMISED AND SABOTAGED

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A personal sense of betrayal has overtaken some of us who spent so much time and energy to assist the broadcasting industry in setting up what was perceived to be the state-of-the-art technology of television viewership- measurement. One should have realised though that the finest of systems can always be sabotaged.

The Indian Broadcasting Federation (IBF) had expressed its dream of putting in position its own ratings body long before it succeeded in doing so in 2015. Its Broadcasting Audience Ratings Council (BARC) was the first public body that took on the monopoly enjoyed by a private rating agency called TAM Media Research, which was jointly owned by AC Nielsen and Kantar Media Research/IMRB, both of which are very well-known international media houses. Besides, there was a smaller ratings firm called Audience Measurement and Analytics Ltd (aMap). The dominant player, TAM, faced perennial charges against it.

The first was that it had too little a sampling base that operated through too few digital measurement meters and also that the addresses of some of these metered television households were known to a select few television broadcasters. It was alleged that these big players bribed people in some of those households where TV rating meters were installed and thereby rigged the meters in their favour. Even with a lot of assistance and guidelines from the government, it took BARC five years to actually start functioning, as the industry had to invest a lot in its hardware and software. But once it established its presence, almost the entire broadcasting industry and its advertisers moved towards this more public and transparent entity.

The reason for narrating this story is to explain the background in which today's BARC system came into being and the extremely high hopes with which it was nursed. Even more than this, it is to recall that underhand games were known quite well even under earlier rating systems, proving that we remain all very bad students of history. It teaches lessons that we never care to understand and then we blame poor history for repeating itself.

It is, of course, difficult to digest how a public body so jealously overseen by competing rivals could be taken for so big a ride. After all, besides the Indian Broadcasters Federation (IBF), BARC is governed by the apex federations of advertising and media players of India, the ISA and the AAI. It is a pity that such hawk-eyed oversight failed to realise or suspect that its own appointed gatekeeper was compromising its own and the organisation's integrity.

While governmental bodies remain notorious for their lethargic, bureaucratic style of functioning, and also because many a public servant is susceptible to allurements, competing private bodies are said to be more alert and efficient. Like crabs in a bucket that keep a sharp watch over each other, it is more than strange that the suspiciously high ratings that were

awarded by BARC to some were not questioned by die-hard rivals on the body. Unless, of course, there are more skeletons that are yet to tumble out of BARC cupboard.

When one is openly blessed by the most powerful and forbidding Prime Minister in India's history, one assumes, perhaps, that one is entitled to treat all those he targets as criminals ripe for third degree verbal torture. Especially if the person or the organisation has opposed or differed with India's most infallible leader. In fact, had it not been for this undisguised arrogance that this particular channel-head started displaying, we may never even have known about the BARC's rating scandal.

In fact, the brutal manner in which this regime's darling anchor went about manufacturing a sensational case accusing all and sundry in the Hindi film industry after the suicide of one its stars was downright scurrilous. As he blazed on ruthlessly with his malicious conjured narrative, slashing the world around as just expendable 'collateral damage', he made the mistake of attacking the reputation of the police as well.

Then, nemesis struck. Isaac Newton had articulated certain laws of nature and one of them spoke of an equal and opposite reaction. This appeared in the form of a criminal case filed by Mumbai Police against him and all those who participated in the alleged manipulation of the TRP of BARC, by bribing certain metered households. The world's largest network of television measurement and one of the most sophisticated had thus been breached by its own CEO who claims to have been paid middling amounts of money.

A mass of communication through WhatsApp messages between the CEO of BARC and the head of the nation's most acerbic channel was unlocked by the police. What appears quite clearly from these messages is that not only was the TRP system compromised, but the topmost secret of the State, so critical to the nation's security and safety, may also have been divulged. This is more dangerous, and indeed, worrisome.

Apart from this glaring reference there are several others that reveal a very rare proximity of a media person with the Prime Minister — one who has gone down in history as the only one who never addressed a press conference during his tenure. It speaks of how this nearness and dearness appeared to be of adroit use in getting things done.

This is what may have induced the CEO of BARC to play the game, as he appears to have been overawed by the close encounters of the deeply political kind. There is a reference to a Rathore (we had one as the junior information minister) freezing a scandal about how the indicted television channel siphoned off Doordarshan's revenues. It would be only proper to get into it, if not for anything else, to salvage the young politician's reputation.

What appears to be panning out from these messages is more than just how the game of thrones is played: it reveals the murky rivalries that play behind the apparently united phalanx of the Godi Media supporting the present dispensation.

Thanks to the chronically intemperate nature of our protagonist, we are rewarded with delightful invectives about the other television greats of the regime's genuflecting brigade. There is, thus, no monolith we confront but an intensely divided 'me only' band of media and

other forces that surround the great leader. Let us listen to history's whispers that no such arrogant autocrat has ever been able to perpetuate his rule by surrounding himself with such a squabbling army of fawning retainers.