THE DIGITAL SWITCHOVER OF *DOORDARSHAN*: INTRIGUING DYNAMICS OF POLICY OPTIONS[1]

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ABSTRACT *In a country with few channels occupying the terrestrial space – all of which are owned by the public broadcaster – what is the rationale behind the expensive and mandatory transition to digital terrestrial television? This paper undertakes a hard look at the incorporation of this transition in the wider moves towards digitalization by* Doordarshan*, India's public broadcaster. Drawing on approaches in institutionalism that aid unraveling why certain interests get prioritized over others, the paper unmasks the official reasoning justifying the digital switchover in India. The paper infers that the marginal sections of society, for whom* Doordarshan *is the sole affordable TV outlet, will be the most challenged by this mandatory transition. Moreover, the move to terrestrial digital broadcasting is not guided by public interest values like enhancing diverse content, which could be the key mechanism for* Doordarshan *to regain the viewership it has lost to private satellite channels.*

KEYWORDS

DIGITAL TELEVISION, INDIA, *DOORDARSHAN*, BROADCAST POLICY

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INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in 1959, television broadcasting in India was not only monopolized by the public broadcaster, but also entailed only one TV channel. In most countries, a multi-channel broadcasting milieu existed in the terrestrial space, with public and private stations, well before the emergence of Cable & Satellite (C&S) television channels. But in India, a multi-channel television milieu, eclipsing the monopoly of the public broadcaster's terrestrial channel, emerged only after the advent of private C&S transmissions in the mid-1990s. This fragmented the hitherto unified broadcasting space created by the terrestrial transmission of the public broadcaster. And as the proliferation of C&S channels created new electronic boundaries based on linguistically and culturally defined programming genres and content, it disrupted the politically and ideologically bounded, 'national' footprint of the public broadcaster that had characterized India until the early 1990s. Arguments affirming the choice and diversity afforded by national and trans-national C&S channels found a covert consensus in India (Thomas, 1993). This not only undermined all rationales to reorganize public broadcasting, but motivated the public broadcaster, *Doordarshan* to commercially engage with the emerging milieu of C&S. It was constantly argued that its elaborate terrestrial network could impart a competitive advantage in attracting advertising revenues from private C&S channels (Shields and Muppidi, 1996; McDowell, 1997).

Twenty years later, nation-wide terrestrial transmission, cutting across the borders of India's 29 states, remains solely the domain of *Doordarshan*. This, together with the terrestrial space remaining a monopoly of the public broadcaster, makes the switchover to digital terrestrial transmission (DTT) implicitly a concern only of the public broadcaster. Here we need to ponder over a significant tension brewing between the rapidly proliferating private C&S channels incessantly fragmenting the national broadcasting, and consequently political space, and the post-DTT role of the public broadcaster in weaving cross-regional discourses within this large and diverse country. Recognizing the import of this tension on both the ecology heralded by media convergence and broadcast policymaking in a digital era demands that we scrutinize both these processes in light of each other – i.e., the rapid proliferation of private C&S channels and, slow transition towards DTT by the public broadcaster. While tons of scholarly attention has been given to the former, the latter has been under addressed in academic and policy literature. In fact, this imbalance typifies the scarce research more generally on public enterprise across all sectors of the Indian economy and industry over the last two decades, i.e., ever since deregulation and privatization unfolded.

This paper seeks to understand the position and role of *Doordarshan* in post-deregulation India by taking a hard look at the move towards DTT. We use the lens of public interest to identify and explain the dissonance between the official rationale of the move towards DTT and the inconsistencies in this reasoning, especially in light of the policy options at hand. Our objective is not to unearth how the idea of DTT, originating in global, inter-governmental agreements, was covertly and overtly catapulted into India. Rather we wish to spotlight the switchover to DTT as the latest example of decision

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makers failing to ensure that broadcast policy interventions were directed to maximize social welfare, a scenario also observed during similar switchovers in other countries[2].

Public interest has been an underlying theme in critical scholarship on Indian media. A close reading of the narratives reveals three recurring values or measures defining public interest, which are: access, diversity and autonomy. Among the many suggested reforms within the broadcasting sector, arguably, the role of public broadcasters has been the most important (see Thomas, 1993; Page and Crawley, 2000). In the Indian context, this necessarily entails that the public broadcaster becomes more 'public', and therefore exist as a robust alternative to private media, through guarantees of universal access and the telecast of diverse and independent content. While the public broadcaster has proactively sought to ensure greater access via its array of services, it has consistently fallen short of its longstanding goal of organizational and editorial autonomy. This has been principally due to its continuing dependence on government financial support, even while drawing funds and profit from the market (Sinha, 1996; McDowell, 1997). This has also due to the absence of another longstanding reform, that of of establishing an independent regulator to oversee the functioning of both public and private broadcasters (Price and Verhulst, 1998).

For this paper, we examine the policy and practices around the digital switchover of the public broadcaster through the public interest axes of access and diversity. Here access includes both geographical reach as well as economic ability, i.e., audience affordability. We consider an approach rooted in institutionalism most useful to unravel the making of broadcast policies and thereby explain why policies often lead to the interests of certain stakeholders being bypassed or prioritized over others (see Galperin, 2004; Bauer et al., 2003). Critically examining the process and rationale of the switch towards DTT, this paper argues that the marginal sections of society, for whom *Doordarshan* is the sole accessible and affordable TV outlet, will be the most challenged by this mandatory switchover.

The paper begins by introducing *Doordarshan*, before encapsulating the key administrative and policy processes concerning its various moves towards digitalization. We then critically locate DTT in the dynamics marking the terrestrial space of India, and critically evaluate the public interest implications embedded in formal rationale of DTT. We draw on policy papers and expert interviews with officials in *Doordarshan*, conducted by the second author as part of the India country report under the *Mapping Digital Media* initiative of the Open Society Foundation during 2011-13. Our conclusions capture the fault-lines in this expensive switchover, and how it reflects the personality of the public broadcaster.

DOORDARSHAN: SCOPE, ORGANISATION AND FINANCING

India's public service broadcast authority, Prasar Bharati, was established in 1997 as a statutory autonomous body in order to oversee both *Akashvani* (All India Radio) and *Doordarshan* (National Television). Today it comprises a network of 31 television channels

[2] A striking parallel is Australia, albeit more than a decade ago; see Papandrea (2001).

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and 232 radio stations, and is among the largest terrestrial networks in the world. This paper will focus on Prasar Bharati's television arm, *Doordarshan* – often referred to as DD, for short. *Doordarshan* broadcasts in the terrestrial mode, mostly analog, and has a three-tier programming service: 6 national channels, 11 regional language channels, and 12 state networks, besides an international channel, *DD India*. All the channels are also available on C&S. *Doordarshan* was the first to offer a Direct-to-Home (DTH) service, in 2004, called *DD Direct Plus,* a rent-free service, offering a mix of its own channels, private TV channels and also some FM radio stations. In the national terrestrial mode, the public broadcaster covers about 92 % of the population and 82 % of the country's territory.

As mandated by the Prasar Bharati Act, 1990, a 13-member Board is responsible for the supervision and management of *Akashvani* and *Doordarshan*. *Doordarshan's* budget comes via the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) in the form of equity, grant-in-aid or loans. Special budgetary allocations are also made, such as those that were made for the Commonwealth Games in 2010 and for the digitalization of terrestrial transmission.[3] Prasar Bharati also reaps revenues from commercial programming; it enjoys certain competitive advantages over private broadcasters, such as through the Sports Broadcasting Signal Act of 2007 which allows DD and AIR to share telecasts of major sports events hosted by private channels, and which includes at least 25 % advertising revenue share in television and 50 % in radio. In principle, the Prasar Bharati Board's autonomy is guaranteed by having only one representative of the MIB. However, since the broadcaster depends on the government for at least half of its budget, this makes it vulnerable to political interference in management and editorial matters. This had led to scholars explaining content creation and curation on the public broadcaster as shaped by the vagaries of political interventions and the troubling limitations of bureaucratic action (see Udupa, 2012).

In April 2010, a Group of Ministers (GoM) outlined a plan for the financial restructuring of Prasar Bharati, with recommendations including converting outstanding government loans to grants, waiving interest, and a scaling down of government support. Specifically, it called for Plan Funding to be given only as grants, and a cap on the government's annual financial support at 50 % of its operating expenses for the next five years. The GoM also rejected a license fee proposal, arguing it would be difficult and costly to administer.[4] Prasar Bharati subsequently revised its funding plans, which included an active marketing strategy, e-auctions of channel slots on its DTH service and prime time slots on *DD National* to different production houses, cross channel advertising from private broadcasters,[5] and the launch of over 200 AIR FM stations to tap local advertisers.

Over the years there has been a noticeable decline in the number of households having only *Doordarshan*, i.e., terrestrial-only TV sets. This is explained first, by the

[3] For instance, Rs 6.2 billion (US$111 million) was set aside for DD for digitization under the 11th Plan scheme; and Rs 4.15 billion (US$74 million) sanctioned for the coverage of the 2010 Commonwealth Games, equally divided as a grant and a loan.
[4] According to Ashok Jailkhani, Prasar Bharati has at various times proposed a license fee, but the government is resistant to implement it, as it might affect its mass political support; Interview with Ashok Jailkhani, Additional Director General (Programme), *Doordarshan*, New Delhi, 15.04.2011.
[5] Prasar Bharati had until now barred airing commercials of private media firms, including of DTH operators.

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migration of existing *Doordarshan*-only households to C&S households; and secondly, by the propensity of fresh TV households in scattered rural geographies – which make it financially impractical to extend cable relays – to 'leapfrog' to DTH, largely provided by private vendors (FICCI-KPMG, 2012). Questions have often been raised in Parliament about the declining popularity of DD channels. In response, DD has maintained that its in-house Audience Ratings System (DART)[6] gives a better picture of viewership patterns, and that the data collected by private agencies such as TAM[7] does not adequately capture the public broadcaster's largely non-urban viewership. For its part, the MIB has insisted that both DART and TAM data reveal most viewers still prefer DD.

Despite the controversies over methodologies, urban TV audiences turn more to private news channels for two reasons: because DD is perceived to air government perspectives, especially during critical events such as elections and conflict scenarios; and, because C&S channels provide incessant updates and un-scheduled, special bulletins compared to DD, which while having live telecasts, tends not to tamper with its regular news cycles.

Prasar Bharati continues to receive support from the exchequer, however haphazardly, despite occasional propositions to variously privatize, shut down or scale down particular services and/or infrastructure. In early 2013, the Government approved a proposal for Prasar Bharati's financial restructuring while waiving off its debt of over Rs 13000 million (over US$ 200 million) (Economic Times, 2013). Such generosity is not as much to uphold the principles and values of public broadcasting, as a compulsion to pander to entrenched interests, especially of its large staff – which even a decade ago was unimaginably larger than requisite (GOI, 1999)[8].

DISJOINTED MOVES TOWARDS DIGITALIZATION

Since the last decade, the digitization of *Doordarshan* has been a priority for the government, although no separate legislation has ever been considered, let alone proposed, for this purpose. The Planning Commission's 11th Five-Year Plan emphasized Digital Terrestrial Transmission (DTT) and Direct-to-Home (DTH) – the two avenues for digitalizing *Doordarshan* – while suggesting to hold-back any further expansion of the terrestrial network (Planning Commission, 2008: 448). In 2006, the Planning Commission's Sub-Committee on Digitization of Electronic Media also recommended phased digitization for the public broadcaster due to the spectrum efficiency involved (Planning Commission, 2006). In April 2010, the government approved Rs.15.4 billion (US$270 million) for the first phase of digitization. Apart from the financial allocation, officials in *Doordarshan* felt that government commitment to the public broadcaster's digitization plans was better

[6] DART (Doordarshan Audience Ratings) system is based on data collected by 40 DD and 100 AIR Stations from 3,600 rural and 1,600 urban households.
[7] TAM is a private audience ratings agency, subsidiary of AC Neilson, which collects monthly data from 7000 urban households across India nearly 500 million cable & satellite TV households.
[8] The Report found the engineering staff employed by the Doordarshan and All India Radio to be 36 times larger than needed, as per international standards.

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reflected in it being allocated the terrestrial spectrum on a privileged, non-commercial basis, akin to that allocated for other national priority areas like defense and space.[9]

As part of its digital switchover, the satellite transmission of all *Doordarshan* channels, and most of its production centers, have been digitized. But the most important initiative was the launch of *Doordarshan's* DTH service *DD Direct Plus* in September 2004. This was launched before private DTH operators were permitted, thereby giving the public broadcaster a competitive advantage. *DD Direct Plus* started with 33 TV channels, which increased to 58 by 2013. Importantly, this is a rent-free service, and consequently has gained a bigger market-share in smaller towns and rural areas.[10] In the process, *DD Direct Plus* acts as a distribution platform for the private broadcasters. Since its signal is unencrypted and it does not require a branded set-top box (STB)[11], there is no way to quantify the viewership of *DD Direct Plus*.

When *DD Direct Plus* was launched, no specifics were laid out for having private channels on it. However, these were included to attract a wider audience and "make the service popular."[12] Selection was made on "factors such as genre of the channel, its popularity and conformity with the Prasar Bharati mandate, as well as to maintain regional balance covering different languages to make the bouquet attractive and wholesome."[13] With the growing presence of *Doordarshan's* DTH service, by 2005, about 80 Indian and foreign channels were set to join the platform.[14] So in 2006 the government permitted Prasar Bharati to raise the number of TV channels in its DTH line-up from 33 to 50.[15] It also proposed an annual carriage fee of Rs 10 million (US$181,000)[16] from both existing and new broadcasters (Economic Times, 2011), which led to almost all news and entertainment channels quitting the platform.[17] Consequently, in 2007 the carriage fee was reduced to Rs 2.5 million (US$44,000).[18]

In June 2011, Prasar Bharati decided to expand the DTH platform to 200 channels via e-auctions.[19] Following a series of legal battles with private broadcasters in the process of their distribution on *DD Direct Plus*, Prasar Bharati was directed by the Telecom Disputes Settlement and Appellate Tribunal – the judicial arm of the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, the multi-sectoral regulator of the media/communication industries – to adopt a transparent allocation system.[20] The tribunal fixed the minimum reserve price of Rs 15 million (US$262,000) per channel slot (Sinha, 2012) In the e-auctions held in July and August 2011, 26 slots were sold to private broadcasters for Rs 763 million (US$13.4 million) – over three times what was fixed.[21]

[9] Interview with Abhishek Agarwal, Deputy Director (Engineering) *Doordarshan*, New Delhi, 15.4.2011.
[10] Interview with Ashok Jailkhani, Additional Director General (Programme), Doordarshan, New Delhi, 15.4.2011.
[11] Any STB based on open DVB standards can receive and be used for free-to-air channels offered by other DTH platforms.
[12] Answer to Parliament Question No.2740, raised by a member in Rajya Sabha (Upper House of Indian Parliament) 22.8.2005.
[13] Answer to Parliament Question No.22, raised by a member in Lok Sabha (Lower House of Indian Parliament), 23.2.2010.
[14] According to Industry estimates, *DD Direct Plus* had almost a million subscribers in 2005.
[15] Answer to Parliament Question No.275, raised by a member in Rajya Sabha (Upper House of Indian Parliament), 12.12.2005.
[16] 1 US$ = 55.2400 INR (December 2012).
[17] Except the TV channels MH1, Smile TV and Kairali TV.
[18] See http://www.saveondish.com/forum/T-doordarshan-targets-100-channels-on-dth-platform (01.12.2011).
[19] See http://www.indiantelevision.com/headlines/y2k11/june/june54.php (10.12.2011).
[20] An auction was also seen as a chance to make the broadcaster financially independent and use additional resources to meet operational costs, create more content and expand its reach via DTH.
[21] See http://www.rapidtvnews.com/index.php/rtvn-india/news/doordarshan-reaps-inr763mn-from-dth-slot-auction.html (24.12.2011).

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The digitization process has afforded Prasar Bharati newer ways to engage with a wider audience. DTH has helped expand the broadcaster's reach and its radio and television channels, including DD News, have started interactive programs, such as phone-ins and SMS contests. Web/mobile initiatives targeting urban youth have also been started.

However, these initiatives have not necessarily translated into greater diversity of content. The bouquet of channels offered here was the same as on Cable and Satellite, including both *Doordarshan* regional channels and private channels. Dr H.O. Srivastava, a retired Engineer-in-Chief of *Doordarshan* points out: "Although the PSB fulfills certain universal service obligations by having educational and development content in diverse languages, altogether it is short of quality content […]. Also, digital opportunities are yet to be used for niche or local TV channels or for development of exclusive web-based content."[22]

A HARD LOOK AT THE DIGITAL TERRESTRIAL SPACE

Formally, Digital Terrestrial Transmission (DTT) started in January 2003, when DVB-T transmitters were installed in Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Chennai. The entire process of digitization is due to be completed by 2017; until then, terrestrial transmission will be in simulcast mode. However, digital take-up of Prasar Bharati's terrestrial feed is yet to gather the expected momentum or scale in TV and radio. The process of setting up transmitters, which started in 2003 for *Doordarshan* and in 2007 for AIR, is still in the pilot phase. However, since the installation of the first digital TV transmitter in Delhi in 2003, there have been no takers of its receiving sets. The cost of STBs for DTT remain prohibitive, even though engineers in *Doordarshan* expect the prices to be lowered by manufacturers once demand picks up.[23]

But there is no reason why viewers would be attracted to invest in a STB for DTT since there is no vision for having diverse content on the existing channels. Even though DTT offers a large potential for more local channels, this has not been exploited hitherto. In contrast, a viewer's investment in *Doordarshan's* own DTH service enables them to access a higher number of channels, from both *Doordarshan* and private broadcasters.

In the over broadcasting milieu that exists at present, public provisions governing access and affordability to *Doordarshan's* terrestrial transmission, concern three phenomena: the public broadcaster's switchover from analog terrestrial to DTT; the reception of *Doordarshan's* channels via private Cable and DTH distributors; and, the access and affordability of a wider set of its digital services, including DTH. This is because the public broadcaster visualized its DTT and DTH services – often seen as rival policy options in other countries – as part and parcel of the same package of digitization; *Doordarshan* was even allocated resources jointly for both services (Planning Commission, 2006).

[22] Interview with Dr H O Srivastava, former *Engineer-in-Chief, Doordarshan*, New Delhi, 5.4.2011.
[23] Interview with Archana Gupta, Director (Engineering), Transmitter Design, *Doordarshan*, New Delhi, 22.4.2012.

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Although there are no explicit clauses on access or affordability regarding DTT, two decisions by Prasar Bharati can be interpreted to address these. First, the MIB's choice of 2017 as the year to phase out all analog transmissions of *Doordarshan* was calibrated keeping in mind that STB costs would reduce at an average of 7–8 % every year. Second, is the decision for *Doordarshan* to retain its analog terrestrial service for some time – in parallel with its digital terrestrial feed. This vision of simulcast implicitly recognizes many citizens' inability to afford the STB required for DTT if the switchover is immediate. Nevertheless, important details are amiss. For instance, it is unclear if during the years of simulcast both analog and digital feeds would follow the stipulations of the Sports Broadcasting Signal (Mandatory Sharing with Prasar Bharati) Act, 2007.

Similarly, the Strategic Plan for 2011–2017 by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting made no provisions in regards to the affordability of STBs when cable distribution, completely in the private sector, moves to the digital mode; it merely predicted resistance by viewers to incur expenditure on STBs (MIB, 2011). To ensure citizen access to *Doordarshan* channels, the MIB invoked Universal Service Obligation principles to extend the "must-carry provision" on analog cable, first introduced in 1995, to digital cable and DTH. Section 8 of the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act 1995, as amended in 2011,[24] made it mandatory for local cable operators (LCOs) and Multiple System Operators (MSOs) to relay at least two *Doordarshan* terrestrial channels (*DD National* and *DD News*), one regional channel of the respective state, and two parliament channels[25] in the prime band. These must-carry obligations continued for the CAS as part of the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act 1995 to carry two national channels and one regional channel (TRAI, 2006). DTH operators are required to include eight channels of *Doordarshan* as per their License Agreement. These eight specified channels, along with 11 regional channels of *Doordarshan*, are also to be carried by all private digital cable operators, following the legislation on the mandatory digitalization of all cable in December.

In contrast to the digital transitions of both terrestrial transmission and of private cable services, the MIB was direct and proactive in designing provisions for affordability in the state broadcaster's DTH service. As mentioned earlier, *DD Direct Plus* was initially launched to cater to areas uncovered by terrestrial transmission. The service was kept free of monthly subscriptions to "enable those persons who cannot afford to incur recurring expenses on a monthly basis to be able to watch television channels at a one-time cost for purchase of STB without any further expenses." (MIB, 2012: 101–102) Yet, Ashok Jailkhani, Additional Director General, *Doordarshan*, admitted "While DD Direct Plus does not charge a subscription fee, its bouquet of channels is less attractive in big cities compared to private DTH players."[26]

[24] The Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Amendment Act 2011.http://www.mib.nic.in/writereaddata/html_en_files/actsrules/cableamend060112.pdf (22.07.2012).

[25] A notification had been made earlier on 6 November 2007 for the mandatory carriage of the two parliament channels. It was later incorporated under the Amendment Act. See http://www.mib.nic.in/writereadfdata/html_en_files/actsrules/gazett261107.pdf (07.07.2011).

[26] Interview with Ashok Jailkhani, Additional Director General (Programme), Doordarshan, New Delhi, 15.4.2011. Even the MIB Strategic Plan for 2011–2017 envisages the absence of popular pay-TV channels on *Doordarshan's* DTH service as a weakness (MIB, 2011: 14).

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The public broadcaster's DTH service provides a low-cost alternative to commercial DTH services also by way of provisions on STBs. For instance, in the initial years, Prasar Bharati also provided 25,000 DTH receiver units with television sets to bordering states such as uncovered areas in the frontline states of north-east India, and 10,000 DTH units with television sets to Jammu and Kashmir (Prasar Bharati, 2008: 46). Importantly, the STBs for DD Direct Plus – subsequently rechristened as DD Free Dish – are based on open DVB standards and can be used for any DTH platforms that provide free-to-air (FTA) channels; any FTA satellite receiver with at least the MPEG-2 or MPEG-4 DVBS standard can receive the DD Direct Plus bouquet, including radio channels. To further improve the affordability, *Doordarshan* ensured that STBs were available on the open market, allowing users to buy from a range of cheaper options. Unlike private players, *Doordarshan* has no plans to manufacture and market its STBs, although the MIB has become aware of the dependence on imports for the gigantic number of STBs required for digital cable.[27]

Unlike the provisions for DTH STBs, there is no scheme for subsidizing STBs required for DTT on a regular basis, nor free distribution of units for demonstration purposes in remote areas. This is despite the fact that the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) are well aware of how other countries have provided subsidies on STBs and made available loans for persons to buy such equipment (TRAI, 2005). For other parts of the country, the MIB has rather helplessly admitted, "For receiving digital terrestrial signals, viewers will have to incur expenditure on Set Top Boxes." (MIB, 2011: 14) As it is, *Doordarshan's* terrestrial audience measured in terms of households has been declining in percentage, and recently even in absolute, terms; perhaps as a consequence, its current 27 million households predominantly entail the marginal sections of society – those unable to spend a few dollars on monthly cable rents, and in all probability completely unable to purchase an STB. Consequently, there is a risk that at the end of the simulcast period, when STBs become necessary, there will be a sudden drop in *Doordarshan's* terrestrial audience – after having spent hundreds of millions on ushering in DTT.

DTT AND PUBLIC INTEREST

As can be seen, the switchover to DTT has been undertaken through a series of administrative procedures rather than a specifically designed legal framework. Here, aspects of public interest may be evaluated at two levels – in the arguments underlying the rationale for the switch-over, and in the design of administrative implementation for it – the latter also concerning the wider digitization of the state broadcaster.

While aspects of the implementation of the wider digitization of the state broadcaster did factor in some public interest concerns – hence decisions on simulcast during the long switch-over and *Doordarshan Free Dish* being rent-free – what is important to note is that there are no explicit public interest arguments for the terrestrial switch-over. From

[27] The then Union Minister of Information and Broadcasting realized, in retrospect: "Now all the money which is being spent on buying set top boxes is like building a revenue model for China or Taiwan from where these boxes are coming." See http://daily.bhaskar.com/article/NAT-TOP-set-top-box-china-gains-from-our-digitisation-project-4147339-NOR.html (13.01.2013).

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available government documents, three sets of explanations favoring the switchover can be gleaned – none of which constitute a convincing public interest rationale or reflect principles of equity.

The first and dominant rationale for the digitization of terrestrial broadcasting that punctuates various documents from the Planning Commission, the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, and Prasar Bharati is enhancing viewer/listener experience – namely, improving the quality of television signals, introducing program guides, and enabling broadcasts, especially of AIR, on multiple platforms such as webcasting, podcasting, SMS, and mobile (MIB, 2011: 22). The reasons given for developing and promoting allied digital services like mobile television and IPTV are the large number of mobile phone users, and that this is the best platform for delivering the benefits of television and mobile communications in one device, and that such a combination of terrestrial broadcast platforms and mobile platforms is important in terms of spectrum efficiency (Planning Commission, 2006: 8). Policymakers have ignored the fact that few citizens have the requisite mobile handsets and broadband connections; this suggests the wider digitization of the state broadcaster will benefit only certain sections of society.

Second, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting argued that *Doordarshan's* switch from analog to digital transmitters would enable multichannel transmission from a single transmitter (i.e., a relay of about five to eight channels against one analog transmitter) and power efficiency. This forms a large part of the argument on spectrum efficiency of DTT – namely, "Television broadcasting in analog mode requires significant spectrum, which is a scarce resource. Therefore, countries all over the world are migrating from analog to digital terrestrial broadcasting." (MIB, 2011: 52) According to Archana Gupta, Director (Engineering) of Transmitter Design at *Doordarshan*, DTT would serve the public interest by ensuring a more efficient spectrum utilization since it will allow for the carriage of eight to ten channels on the slot of one analog channel. As such, the DVB-2 standard that Prasar Bharati is procuring is far better than the DVB standard planned earlier: it allows 32 instead of 18 channels on a bandwidth of 36 MHz.[28]

While freeing up spectrum is posed as a major argument for moving to DTT,[29] there is no mention of how the freed spectrum – which is commercially the most lucrative and technologically supremely efficient[30] – would be used in the public interest. Some thinking visualized a spectrum dividend being deployed to launch more Prasar Bharati regional terrestrial channels, and mobile reception and/or HDTV services, especially if they are considered to be part of the standard service offering (MIB, 2011: 2). However, no plans for this have been announced. It is pertinent to mention that while the frequency band

[28] Interview with Archana Gupta, Director (Engineering), Transmitter Design, *Doordarshan*, New Delhi, 22.4.2012.
[29] There are two instances where additional spectrum would be required: temporarily, during the simulcast phase when existing analogue and new digital systems would need to be broadcast together; and permanently, in the case of AIR where, while no additional spectrum will be required for DRM transmissions in the MW/SW band, it would be required for DRM transmitters in the FM/VHF band as well as the 'L' band (MIB, 2011: 14).
[30] While some of the frequency bands used for broadcasting in India have exclusive allocations for "Broadcasting," most are shared. For example, the 800/900 MHz bands used for cellular services (GSM and CDMA, etc.) are available for broadcasting also (MIB, 2011: 16).

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used for DTT services is 700 MHz,[31] The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India has recommended using this band for Broadband Wireless Access (BWA) and Worldwide Interoperability for Microwave Access (WiMAX) services for rural areas (MIB, 2011: 17) – which, on the face of it, indicates greater public interest usage than, say, High-definition television or mobile television services, which will be limited to a handful, even in urban areas. As for the revenue generated from parts of the digital dividend transferred to telecom operators (4G), there is no evidence, or evidence of intent, to suggest that it will be deployed either for quality programming – capitalizing on the enhanced viewer/listener experience DTT promises – or to cushion subsidies for the STBs required for *Doordarshan's* DTT audience, the handful that may exist by 2017. Such a re-channeling of resources seems impossible, not only due to the clashing interests ruling the MIB and Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (MCIT), but also due to the prevailing revenue-expenditure practices followed by the government.[32]

As the publicly available information discussed above suggests that the rationale for the digital switchover in terrestrial broadcasting is bereft of convincing public interest arguments, including principles of equity. While the middle and upper strata of society will benefit from the diversity of digital platforms on which news from the public broadcaster can be accessed, there is no blueprint to suggest that this expensive transition will either foster diversity of content, especially at the local level, widen the pluralism of voices in public terrestrial transmission, or enhance access for the country's marginal sections. Dr. H.O. Srivastava says: "Digitization of terrestrial network is a compulsion now as there is no longer a supply of analog transmitters. (…) Because the world is going digital, the switchover is being forced on us, without consideration for the average viewer. What is required is a technology that allows convergence, so that a person can invest in one receiving set and access all terrestrial TV and radio stations."[33]

Unlike in other countries, the terrestrial band in India not only has only one player but also has a limited number of channels; this provides ample space for using other frequencies in this band – be it for television or for non-television media, both private and public. Unless there is compelling evidence to the contrary, the real reason for the unplanned and haphazard vacation of the terrestrial space, in the name of the switchover to DTT, seems to be to enhance revenues of a regime that suffers from a high fiscal deficit – by selling the lucrative spectrum vacated by the terrestrial public broadcaster to private 4G service providers. This seems to fit in, rather neatly, with wider trajectory of the re-utilization of assets of a wider set of public enterprises in India over the last two decades of deregulation and disinvestment.

[31] DD DTT will be provided in the VHF band 4–5 (470–862 MHz); Interview with Archana Gupta, Director (Engineering), Transmitter Design, *Doordarshan*, New Delhi, 22.4.2012.

[32] Revenues from auctions, administered by MCIT, accrue to the consolidated fund of India, whereas expenditure for STB subsidies, under the purview of MIB, stems from its overall annual allocations from the public exchequer.

[33] Interview with Dr H O Srivastava, former *Engineer-in-Chief, Doordarshan*, New Delhi, 5.4.2011.

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CONCLUSION

With few channels occupying the terrestrial space, does the public broadcaster really need to undergo the switch to DTT? Does investing in this expensive transition make sense when most viewers in India access TV on C&S platforms? Posing these fundamental questions makes us see the very idea of DTT being forced fit into the regulatory and institutional context of broadcasting in India – and thereby view the three explanations favoring the switchover with further skepticism.

Evidently, there seems to be no clear and consistent public service vision in launching DTT, including on access, affordability, content planning or convergence. This is why it has neither taken off and is unlikely to emerge in the near future. Consequently, doubts on its potentials and viability have begun to be expressed. The last external review of Prasar Bharati, completed in January 2014, clearly insisted that any existing plans on the further expansion of and investment in DTT must be assessed afresh based on feedback from field reviews (Prasar Bharati, 2014). But, on the policy option for digitalization to be exercised, it intriguingly chose to speak in different voices. In doing so, this echoes experiences in other large countries where the switchover to DTT has equally been marked by a plethora of obscure task-forces that no citizens are aware of, but are driven by either commercializing public infrastructure or protecting private interests.[34]

On the one hand, it recommended to selectively digitalize terrestrial TV operations based on commercial viability – part of wider arguments over the years to impart a commercial orientation to the public broadcaster. It was particularly keen to selectively experiment with and examine the viability of DTT for mobile users. Here again we see that the vision of DTT is tempered more by the compulsions of telecom policy, as explained earlier. DTT and 4G vie for the same spectrum bands, which in the case of 4G is auctioned and results in large revenues for the government – unlike with DTT, where its usage by the public broadcaster does not result in any revenues.

On the other hand, the review also argued for prioritizing DTH over DTT: since the overwhelming share of TV audiences are reached through the C&S mode, while *Doordarshan's* terrestrial channels are watched by an increasingly small share. The review pitched for switching off *Doordarshan's* analog terrestrial transmission within a short timespan, and adopting *DD Free Dish* as the public broadcaster's primary mode of transmission (Prasar Bharati, 2014: 26); this was apart from continuing to vend select *Doordarshan* channels (on the basis of existing USO protocols explained earlier) through the expanding customer base of private DTH and Digital Cable. The review pointed out that the move from terrestrial to satellite transmission would result in "considerable cost saving, even as it offers the possibility of a wider content variety as compared to the limited number of channels available through terrestrial broadcasts." (GOI, 2014: 20-21)

This unresolved question on the technological choice and future of the digital distribution of *Doordarshan* is a reflection of longstanding tensions on the role and shape

[34] Perhaps the most fascinating account of this is on Canada, see Taylor (2010).

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of the public broadcaster in the current, highly commercialized TV ecology. A central question concerns autonomy and the financial model that enables it, specifically the ratio of public and private funds. As a move towards greater autonomy, public funds have successively been curtailed, if not stopped, and commercial avenues and strategies have been increasingly explored. Occasional proposals for a license fee regime have, however, been sidelined. Moreover, this brings to the fore the related question on programming emphases – should it be conditioned by public interest values or by what interests the public? If the latter is indeed the preferred route, as it is now, the rationale and case for having a public broadcaster weakens, especially in the view of private broadcasters, and some voices in the executive, who repeatedly question the competitive advantages and largesse enjoyed by the broadcaster. The competing pull between principles and practices – here, public interest and profit – continues to shape the broadcasters' policy options in all its operational spheres. Here the losers are indeed the sections of society who are still perched on the margins of the wider media revolution in India. Unless backed by a genuine political will, organizationally refurbished and editorially liberalized, *Doordarshan's* significance is only likely to further decline as it, paradoxically, comes into the global DTT infrastructure.

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PRELAZAK *DOORDARSHANA* NA DIGITALNO EMITIRANJE: INTRIGANTNA DINAMIKA POLITIČKIH MOGUĆNOSTI

Vibodh Parthasarathi :: Supriya Chotani

SAŽETAK *Koji se motiv krije u pozadini skupe i obvezatne tranzicije u smjeru digitalne zemaljske televizije u državi s nekoliko kanala koji pokrivaju cjelokupan teritorij, a svi su u vlasništvu javnog medijskog servisa? Ovaj rad nastoji dati dubinski uvid u začetke te tranzicije i njezin širi zamah prema digitalizaciji* Doordarshana, *indijskog javnog medijskog servisa. Oslanjajući se na institucionalne pristupe koji pomažu razjasniti zašto određeni interesi imaju prioritet u odnosu na druge, ovaj članak razotkriva što se zapravo krije iza službenog objašnjenjenja prelaska na digitalno emitiranje u Indiji. Autori zaključuju kako će za marginalizirane društvene skupine, za koje je* Doordarshan *jedini pristupačan pružatelj TV usluga, ta obvezatna tranzicija predstavljati najveći izazov. Osim toga, prelazak na digitalni zemaljski prijem signala nije vođen javnim interesom koji uključuje unapređenje kvalitete sadržaja, što bi za* Doordarshan *mogao biti ključni mehanizam pridobivanja gledateljstva izgubljenog zbog privatnih satelitskih kanala.*

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

DIGITALNA TELEVIZIJA, INDIJA, *DOORDARSHAN*, POLITIKA EMITIRANJA

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