

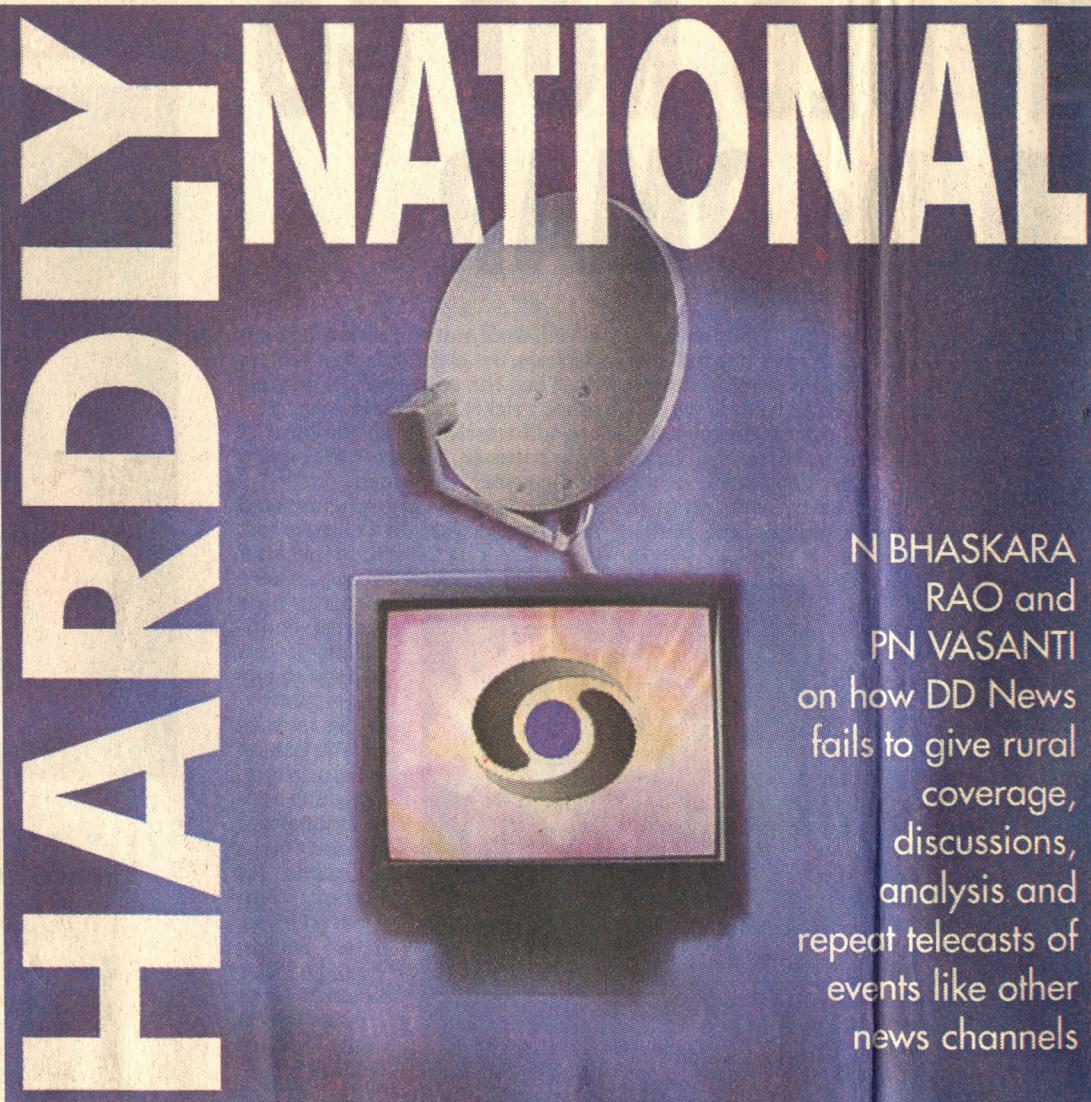
Doordarshan News Channel in its present avatar completes one year this month. As a 24-hour national news channel, it stands out for its overall performance. However, no national channel news bulletins, including DD News, distinguish themselves as representative of India, according to a content analysis of seven news channels.

The extent of coverage of rural India, even in the case of DD News bulletins, is limited. This has been much below two per cent of items in a week across news channels. In fact, about half news bulletin items, including in DD News, are from Delhi and Mumbai. DD News lags behind in production quality, and in the quality of received transmission in case of Cable TV households.

Doordarshan's 24-hour news channel came up in November 2003 rather abruptly in place of its then popular Metro channel. The earlier DD News channel was closed in January 2002, 18 months after it came into being without a convincing explanation. NDTV/STAR (April 2003), Sahara News (March 2003), Aaj Tak (December 2000) and Zee News (1995) had been there for longer period than DD News.

The last couple of years have witnessed hectic activity on the political and economic fronts enabling more recent entrants to catch up and prove their mettle. Despite uncertain support and ambiguous policies, DD News channel did better than many critics expected at the outset, despite DD operations remaining at the mercy of the Ministry and changed power equations.

Coverage of news by DD News channel in the last couple of months corrects a general impression of favouring of the party in



N BHASKARA RAO and PN VASANTI on how DD News fails to give rural coverage, discussions, analysis and repeat telecasts of events like other news channels

Such a concern is expected to expand the scope of news coverage and viewership of news bulletins much beyond the present levels. Contrary to general impression

viewers that they are "national channel". Hardly one per cent of news items in the news bulletins of these various channels are from rural

clock news bulletins, the range has been limited, which perhaps explain why the "penetration of TV" in general, and news channels

tion that such coverage earns TRP points. These channels do not seem to have realised that their very credibility is getting eroded over time, as our study has recently brought out.

Despite so many news channels and round the clock news bulletins, TV news is being viewed as an "appetiser" for prompting newspaper readership. That is, the more one sees news channels, the more likely they read newspapers. That is how newspapers have recently proliferated and improved readership, especially where TV viewership has been high.

There is an urgent need to revisit the basic tenets of public service broadcasting. DD must cater to the majority of the Indian audience. This means going much beyond cities. DD and AIR, put together, have far more field reporters across the country to ensure such a balance.

Doordarshan and AIR are facing challenges today on several fronts. These include financial sustainability, human resource development and deployment, marketing and positioning of the news channel. To be able to meet these challenges and make the most of new opportunities that new technology brings, it is important for Prasar Bharati to operate as a corporate entity and professionalise.

For this the Government should ensure financial support as annual "budgetary grant" on certain criteria, the same way as in the case of Supreme Court of India or even UPSC. Some serious efforts in this direction are being made of late.

AIR or DD can become global players with sustained support. An ad hoc view of broadcasting by each of successive regime in the last 30 years has let down these two na-

including in Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Delhi and Mumbai. DD News lags behind in production quality, and in the quality of received transmission in case of Cable TV households.

Doordarshan's 24-hour news channel came up in November 2003 rather abruptly in place of its then popular Metro channel. The earlier DD News channel was closed in January 2002, 18 months after it came into being without a convincing explanation. NDTV/STAR (April 2003), Sahara News (March 2003), Aaj Tak (December 2000) and Zee News (1995) had been there for longer period than DD News.

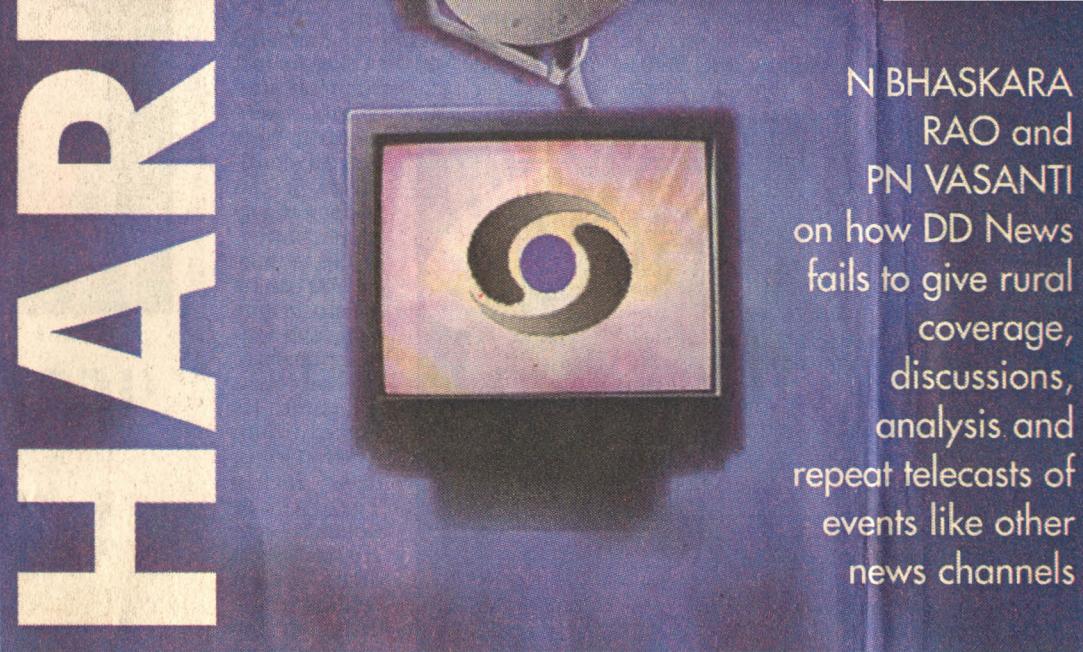
The last couple of years have witnessed hectic activity on the political and economic fronts enabling more recent entrants to catch up and prove their mettle. Despite uncertain support and ambiguous policies, DD News channel did better than many critics expected at the outset, despite DD operations remaining at the mercy of the Ministry and changed power equations.

Coverage of news by DD News channel in the last couple of months corrects a general impression of favouring of the party in power — assuming the channel maintains similar restraint. Coverage of the Prime Minister's first formal press conference in September is a good example.

An analysis of PM's press conference by different News channels brings out that DD News did nothing of that sort.

On the contrary, channels like Star and NDTV did better follow-up coverage of the PM's press conference by way of discussions and repeat coverage. DD, on the other, did relatively less repeat coverage in the subsequent half hourly bulletins. It hardly had any follow up analysis.

News channels are expected to be concerned in their coverage about at least four parameters. The four parameters are: Origin of news, concern as evident from subject matter of content, extent of repeat of certain news, and scope of coverage as news or features.



N BHASKARA

RAO and

PN VASANTI

on how DD News fails to give rural coverage, discussions, analysis and repeat telecasts of events like other news channels

Such a concern is expected to expand the scope of news coverage and viewership of news bulletins much beyond the present levels. Contrary to general impression, and claims by some channels, DD News fared relatively better.

Although 40 per cent of news items of DD News bulletins originate in Delhi, against 37 per cent of other news channels, DD news

viewers that they are "national channel". Hardly one per cent of news items in the news bulletins of these various channels are from rural areas. And 90 per cent of Budget coverage by channels in July-August, 2004 was limited to Delhi. Even at times like the elections (national and state), the coverage from rural areas has not crossed three per cent against 70 per cent for

clock news bulletins, the range has been limited, which perhaps explain why the "penetration of TV" in general, and news channels more particularly, remained nearly stagnant. The preoccupation with politics is even more than the newspapers as is evident from CMS Media Lab analysis. DD News, however, devotes only a quarter of items of its bulletins to politics, against about 33 per cent by other news channels.

Despite proliferation of channels and intense competition, their overall coverage of India has not expanded beyond what it was earlier in terms of news origination or subject focus. On the contrary, certain hype and trivialisation in the coverage has been obvious and, in the process, the very definition of news has changed. But, technical quality and designing elements have come a long way; so also anchoring and interactivity.

News channels of late have been hyping their coverage of certain items much beyond their relevance or significance. It is a mispercep-

Star and NDTV did better follow-up coverage of the PM's press conference. DD, on the other hand, did relatively less repeat coverage in the subsequent half hourly bulletins'

does better in terms of spread of news coverage across the country. For example, a little over 10 per cent of news items in DD News bulletins originate from Kolkata and Chennai, as against hardly a couple of per cent in the case of other news channels. Half or more of news bulletins of national channels cannot be from Delhi and Mumbai month after month.

Coverage of rural India by all news channels, including DD, has been a casual affair, as if to remind

crime related news.

In the case of DD News, however, only two per cent of news items are on crime. The extent of items in the news bulletins from abroad has been higher, next only to Delhi. About one-fifth of items in the bulletins are from abroad, one-fifth of them pertaining to India. A significant shift in news coverage in favour of business and sports is striking.

Even as to the subject matter of news items covered by round-the-

basic tenets of public service broadcasting, DD must cater to the majority of the Indian audience. This means going much beyond cities. DD and AIR, put together, have far more field reporters across the country to ensure such a balance.

Doordarshan and AIR are facing challenges today on several fronts. These include financial sustainability, human resource development and deployment, marketing and positioning of the news channel. To be able to meet these challenges and make the most of new opportunities that new technology brings, it is important for Prasar Bharati to operate as a corporate entity and professionalise.

For this the Government should ensure financial support as annual "budgetary grant" on certain criteria, the same way as in the case of Supreme Court of India or even UPSC. Some serious efforts in this direction are being made of late.

AIR or DD can become global players with sustained support. An ad hoc view of broadcasting by each of successive regime in the last 30 years has let down these two national institutions, despite their unique role and immense potential.

Unless we have a vision first about broadcasting in its various forms, and an understanding of the changing global scene, right kind of initiatives cannot be expected.

DD also needs to get out of certain trap that the "TRP culture" implies for a public service broadcaster. An irrelevant TRP system has warped the priorities of not only DD, but other news channels too. The TRP system has suppressed the real viewership of DD.

If only DD had enabled its widely distributed transmitters, covering practically every district, with programme originating capabilities, it would have been far more appropriate and cost-effective, besides further expanding TV's reach.

Rao is chairman and
Vasanti is director,
Centre for Media Studies

(Courtesy: Vidura)