

Satellite services must be regulated if India is to reap the benefits of the multi-channel revolution, argues Rajdeep Sardesai of New Delhi Television

## Managing Growth

**A**t the millennium it was often said that we were entering an Asian century and the dramatic changes in India in the past few years seem to be bearing this out. The west is increasingly looking to India as a business partner with outsourcing of technology services, legal and accountancy work being some of the best-known examples. The explosive growth of the Indian economy has been accompanied by a cultural boom. International interest in the Bollywood film industry has never been greater and within India there has been a huge expansion of multi channel television.

But this growth raises potential difficulties as well as creating new opportunities. Some media professionals are concerned about the unregulated nature of satellite services and the effect this is having on programming standards. One of these is Rajdeep Sardesai, Managing Editor of New Delhi Television, the leading 24 hour satellite news channel. He explains why channels like NDTV have been so successful:

**RJ:** I think one of the reasons television has exponentially grown is because there has been a greater demand - advertising revenues have grown exponentially. Consumer choice itself is driving the economy more than it ever did, some would call it liberalization and others would call it the basic opening up of the economy which has provided far more opportunities. So what was a state monopoly, that is to say the entire television sector has now become much more competitive and available to the private sector use. It's revolutionized the entire system allowing you to beam from Singapore, Hong Kong,

Dubai. There is enough advertising revenue for you to make it as a successful product.

**IM:** Is it expensive to run a 24-hour news channel? Do you find you are making enough money for this to be sustainable?

As far as our 24-hour news network we now make profits goes just 2 years into the business. From 1995 to 2000 we were producing a 24-hours channel but for Star TV. So we didn't have to worry about the hardware because it was done by Star. We started doing our own thing during 2002 and we are making profits now. It's expensive; it could cost anything up to 150 crores of Indian rupees which is about £20M for the first three years. And we managed to cross that because advertising revenues are growing even faster than expenses.

**IM:** And do you find that you are getting the high value advertising?

That's right, the people with a lot of money to spend. The business channel gives you the top end of the market. And your English language also gets you to the top end of the market in a manner that Hindi will never do. But the real numbers are in Hindi, in terms of viewers. I mean all your top 50 news programs will all be in regional languages. English is a much smaller section of the market but with a very high profile. But if you want to get advertising for mass market products like tea you need a Hindi channel as well.

**IM:** Am I right in thinking only a small proportion of Indians speak english?

It is small but it's great, and it's extremely



Rajdeep Sardesai

inferential. I always say there is an Indian language called English. Most of our good schools the quality of students when they learn English will probably be better than what you get in England. And it's a language which brings South and North India together in a way that no other regional language can. So it becomes a sort of a language which binds the country together.

**IM: What role do regional languages play in the broadcasting market?**

There is a news channel in every Indian language today and there are fifteen in the constitution. In South India because it's so strong regionally you'll have 2 or 3 channels in a regional language just doing news. In fact the most commercially successful is a Tamil news channel - it's sort of a huge viewer base and they get strong advertising support. So the regional languages are actually the real powerhouses. English is the language of influence and of the decision makers. It's a fragmented audience with every language having a distinct viewership and therefore virtually one channel in every language today.

**IM: Do you find there is a symbiotic relationship between changing social trends in Indian society and the growth of channels of multi channel television?**

I think you're seeing that more in the entertainment genre. The big story of Indian television in the last 10 years has been the soaps. I mean its like Coronation Street 20 times over! Most of the money goes into so called family dramas. There are times when the country simply comes to a halt at 10 in the night!

There are many who argue that they promote extremely retrovert family marriages - the women are either a vamp or a submissive and there are constant problems between mother in law and daughter. So there is that element which believes that that sort of far from promoting the family what you are doing is distorting family marriages.

And in terms of the news media there is a tendency because of competition to result to sensationalism. There is a sense that this is becoming normal - we had a news channel a week ago which showed politicians they claimed in a sexual act. It was obviously part pornography, part news and there is no real control over it.

The multi-channel environment widens consumer choice - it's important that politics not be defined in a narrow sense and that it reflects much more popular culture, lifestyle, entertainment, sports. The flip side is that there is no concern about rules - about media ethics. Ethics and values have been simply thrown out of the window.

**IM: It's rather surprising that you go from "state control" of television to a situation where for many channels there is no regulation at all.**

The state is partly to blame for that because it's ten years into the revolution, and they've made no real effort. They've been speaking about the setting up of a broadcasting authority on the lines of the BBC - a kind of autonomous body which would regulate the entire medium but that has never happened.

I think it serves the states interest to keep the entire notion of what's right and what's wrong as amorphous as possible because then you can excise authority in a more chaotic world. It might sound paradoxical but that's the way the government sometimes sees it. If rather than having fixed rules you keep the rules as fluid as possible, you can intervene in any situation should you so desire. But also they've just not applied themselves to it, they've chosen to abdi-

cate their own role as a regulator.

**IM: Is setting up some kind of regulator the biggest policy priority for you?**

Absolutely, it has to be truly autonomous. The government - as part of its half-hearted effort to ensure that the state broadcaster should be a public service broadcaster - set up an organization which they said would regulate the whole media environment. But in fact all it did was regulate the state broadcaster. They appointed their favourite bureaucrats to the board so instead of being independent it ended up being another extension of the Indian state. You have to have a regulatory authority but you have to make sure it's independent. We've been quite successful in India with our telecoms regulatory authority and telecoms has been one of the successes of our age. In the media for some reason we've failed to do that. It suits channel owners I think because they can do the sort of thing I described earlier and get away with it.

**IM: Do the public object to that kind of thing?**

I don't think the public is objecting but there is growing concern over where this media

explosion will take us. The programmes that sell the most on new channels in India (and probably all over the world) are crime programmes. The more blood you show, the more murder, rape and kidnappings, all reconstructed to make it as in your face as possible the more you sell. One section of the viewership is lapping it up, but another section is increasingly concerned as to what direction this media bombardment is taking us.

It's a double-edged sword. The media overload is not a bad thing when a tsunami is happening because it sort of galvanizes you into action and creates a sense of collective conscience which can have a very positive impact. But crime shows are an example of the negative impact, You've got four Indian channels all showing these shows at 11 pm all trying to out do each other in terms of goriness.

**IM: Do you think competition has a negative impact on programming standards?**

In a strange way it does. Because then there is no baseline, anything goes. When competition doesn't have any regulation that is the danger.



*Rajdeep Sardesai was talking to Martin Sims*



The NDTV website