

Radio News : Present and Future

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Forecasting future is in the domain of astrology. Being no astrologer, I cannot predict the future of radio news but having worked in senior positions in All India Radio (News), I can cite certain challenges before AIR news, being aired from Delhi and 44 regional stations throughout day and night. Over 600 news bulletins are broadcast, everyday, in various languages and dialects which are heard by some 12% of India's population. Television news from Doordarshan and private channels are watched and heard by some 32% people, i.e., by about 35 crore people. The future of radio news has to be seen in the context of its present status, because as TS Eliot wrote, years ago: "Time present and time past are contained in time future and time future contained in time past".

The challenges before radio news in 'time past' were different from the present. Only 30 years ago, AIR news had no rival in the broadcast arena. Newspapers have been in circulation in India since the *Bengal Gazette* in 1818. When radio news was started in 1927 by the Indian Broadcasting Company, it left printed news far behind in immediacy and reach. That way, news in print was never a competitor with broadcast news. The combined reach of some 50 thousand newspapers and periodicals in over 20 languages and dialects in India is about 12 crore, i.e., less than one-tenth of population, whereas some 44% of India's 115 crore people either watch TV, or listen to AIR or both. The first real competition came from TV news from 1965, intensely from 1982 after the Asian Games in Delhi. TV news is audio like radio news; additionally, it has the video which in 43 years from its modest beginning in India, took it ahead of radio news. There being no other broadcasting organization except AIR in India, radio news holds the monopoly; even the immensely popular FM radio bulletins are compiled by AIR News Rooms.

Globalization is demolishing monopolies and competition is enhancing quality of products and lowering prices. With no rival in the radio domain, All India Radio is under no compulsion to upgrade its fare and quality. Having served AIR news for 20 years, between 1970 and 2000, I have no qualm in admitting that quality has remained about the same since 1970 when I first joined Kolkata Station as a correspondent. In 38 years since, formats of national bulletins from Delhi have somewhat changed with lot of voice-casts and occasional live coverage but not as much as used in TV news. Foreigners visiting or living in India complain about news bulletins going in split hours, like 0815, which are difficult to remember. Some medium-wave channels, like Kolkata-B are nearly inaudible and have too narrow band-width. The prestigious 'Spotlight' programme from Delhi has given way to a kind of tete-a-tete between a journalist and a compeer; the 'Current Affairs' programme, however, has remained the feather in the crown. In the last two years, a number of new bulletins have been launched, even from inaccessible Stations like Kargil but I doubt, if listeners have correspondingly increased. In urban India, people tune to radio to listen to cricket or football matches and election results during power-offs and while out of homes; in cities and towns of West Bengal particularly, transistor sets are brought and switched on in the wee hours of the Mahalaya day to listen to *Mahishasur Mardini* which never stales.

I believe, the main challenge before the AIR news, now and in future is, and will be, to woo back its listeners. Probably taking a cue from my suggestion, made in a letter to the editor of *The Statesman*, a world news bulletin has been started from Delhi, this year. Because of the very real freedom of the press, India's media are of world standard but

readers, viewers and listeners of media have little interest in world news. AIR and *Doordarshan* news will improve if the bulletins carry more of field reports, filed from mobile phones. Two Kolkata-based newspapers and two private TV channels gave excellent coverage of the year-long violence in Nandigram in 2007 and the tumultuous events leading to the closure of NANO from Singur; comparatively, AIR and DD coverage were a pittance.

AIR news will not have a future, unless it becomes, not a rival, but complementary to TV news. It can score over news on the idiot box where visuals are not necessary, or are a distraction. With passage of time, rival radio networks will come up in the private sector. The Union cabinet is reported to have acceded to this long-standing demand by the corporate sector. Ham and community radio is also in the offing. Organisational in-house broadcasts are also a possibility. In developed countries, government-owned radio Stations, like the *Voice of America*, have poor listening; AIR has to break the mould, as it is now under a corporation. The Prasar Bharati is reportedly hamstrung by inadequate funds; many regular posts, hitherto manned by Indian Information Service personnel have been abolished, or remain unfilled.

Time has come for AIR news to shed its monopolistic pride and indolence and jump into the media fray to woo back its listeners by better technology and more resources of money and manpower. Happily, AIR language bulletins are still very popular in rural areas, particularly in homes without TV or newspapers, but they have lost a sizeable section of urban listeners. Therefore, AIR news has to strive to bring them back with more efficient gathering, presentation and programming of news and news-based programmes which both urban and rural people should, and want to, hear. Merely adding bulletins, or increasing the number of news-originating or news-relaying Stations, is not enough. □□□

[Adapted from an address to a seminar on 'The future challenges before radio news', held in Kolkata on 22nd November 2008.]