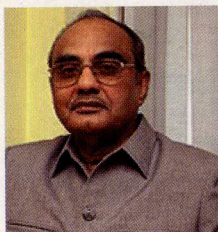


High time the TAM/ TRP era ended



N. Bhaskara Rao

NDTV's allegations against Nielsen-Kantar, sponsors of the TAM-TV ratings in India, for fudging data and deliberately publishing in return for bribe, received wide media reporting. Although such accusations against TAM were not new and the deceptivity of TRPs had been almost an 'open secret' in media circles for some years, the law suit filed by NDTV in a New York court created ripples. Now, Prasar Bharati, too, is considering filing a law suit against TAM on similar grounds. The issues involved, however, are not limited to NDTV or DD

In its 198 page suit, NDTV is seeking "compensation" and "punitive damages" from Nielsen-Kantar for adversely affecting its revenue, reputation, profitability, capitalisation, stock prices and brand value - in the last eight years and "recklessly disregarding any responsibility". Most people would agree that NDTV is a pioneer on the Indian TV news scene. An analysis of NDTV content produced in recent years reveals that it did come up with certain new initiatives in its programming, as if showing an inclination to deviate from a TRP-driven content model. Whatever be the compulsions of NDTV for filing the suit, the channel needs to be thanked not only for mustering courage, but also for hinting at what the country itself has missed in the process. It meant that Indian television has been under the siege of TRPs; and it has been supporting a particular content model mainly because of the TRP (television rating points) system. I describe this as a hijack. Consequently, the country cannot evolve a more appropriate 'model' that caters to and serves the interests of its people. The tranquilising effect of TRPs on channels is such that we cannot avail of TV channels for national endeavours, cherished goals and the needs of a majority of people. TAM-promoted ratings have suppressed the full play of Indian genius and creativity. That is why apart from the 'loss' that some individual channels suffered on account of TAM (television audience measurement) ratings, what the nation suffered and missed is much more.

Among individual channels, the worst sufferer, of course, has been Doordarshan - much more than NDTV. But for that, TAM alone cannot be blamed, as DD itself has been submissive to such a situation for two decades even when the effect was so obvious. DD never did anything even to put the facts in perspective. On the contrary, it scuttled at the very outset, as early as 1993-94, a truly 'independent' India rating service covering rural areas too, as if it wanted to facilitate TAM. It even abandoned its own DART 'rating' service covering rural and urban areas. Soon thereafter, the director general of DD became the CEO of a foreign channel, which overnight became the beneficiary of the TAM-rating service. I had written about this blatant lapse on the part of DD more than a decade ago. It also shows that India did not envisage what such TRPs would mean in the long term.

(The writer is the founder-chairman, Centre for Media Studies, New Delhi.)

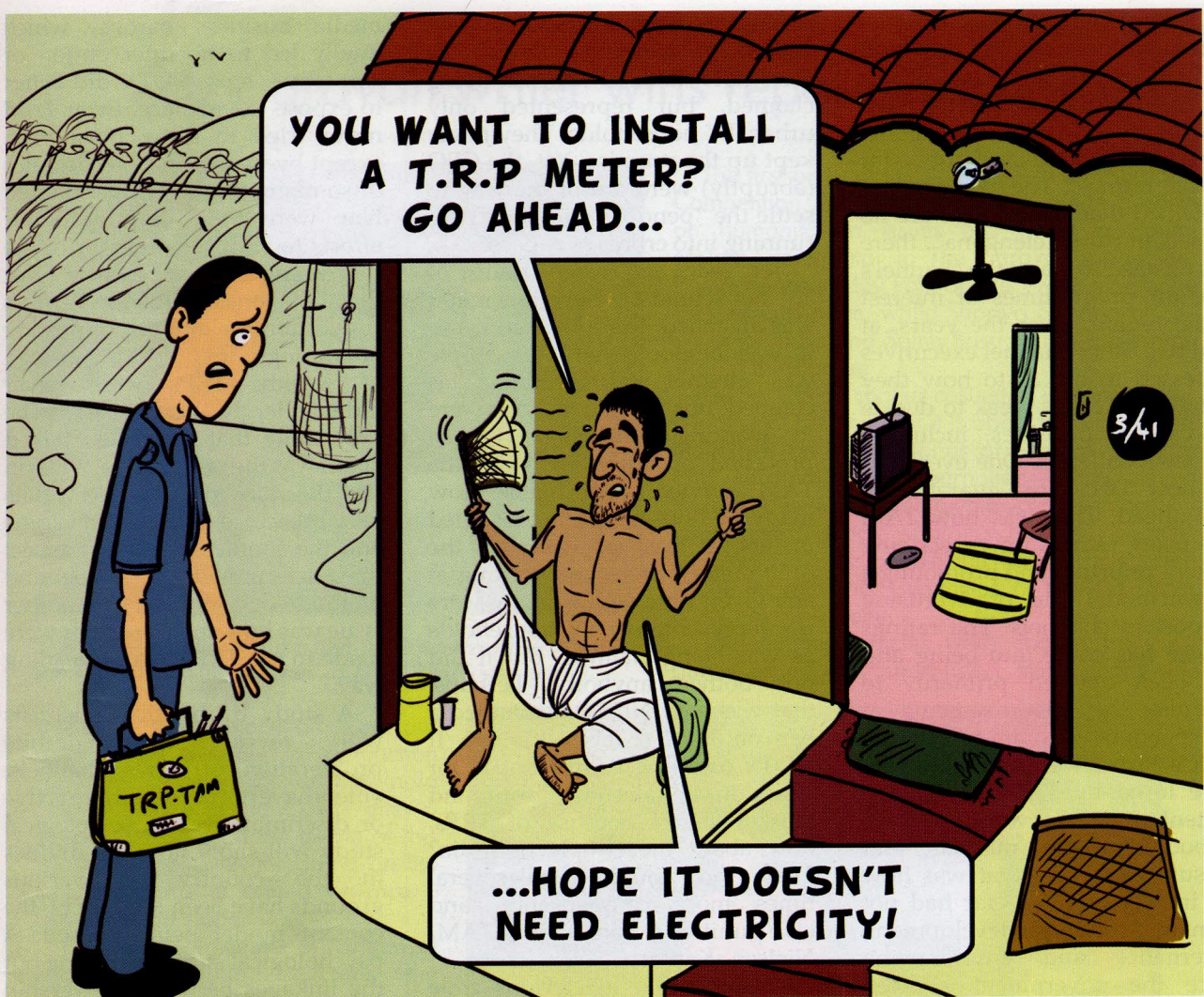


Illustration: Arun Ramkumar

To understand the kind of content model that TAM prompted and promoted, one needs to know about the sponsors of the system and their lineages. The general impression was that the rating service was independent and that it sought to facilitate advertising. The interests of the advertising industry are, by and large, driven by consumerism. Consumerism, in turn, is determined by how the greed in individuals is pampered. It is a global phenomenon. That is how with the proliferation of satellite channels, it was ensured that government allowed 100 percent FDI in advertising first,

and then into market research and later into public relations and media planning. Together, the functions serve the same interests of global investors and promote consumerism to maximise returns. That is how the four services more specifically work in tandem as 'new gatekeepers' of Indian media in a *jugalbandhi* way. Similarly, TAM is 100 percent owned by foreign companies, Nielsen-Kantar (one of the reasons for the NDTV suit in a New York court).

By linking ratings to advertising rates and ad flows, channels have been made to adopt and proceed according to TRPs, and that is how

TRPs have become the benchmark. TAM created its own outfits to advise and provide consultancy on content and marketing of channels. The negative implications of TRPs far outweigh whatever positive elements are attributed to it sometimes. Because of such 'experimentation', the oxygen of the TV medium was never allowed to play a more positive role in the development of TV channels in India.

In 2004, taking part in a Centre for Media Studies discussion on the paradigm shift in media (at the Hyderabad-based Centre for Economic and Social Studies), the

CEO of a Telugu news channel read out a 'prescription' provided by TAM (on the letterhead of one of its subsidiaries), as to what kind of programmes the channel should take up to stand out better in the ratings. The prescription explained that "since there are no TV sets in rural Telengana", there was no need to waste the channel's time for programmes of interest to the region. Over the years, at least two other channel executives confessed to me as to how they go by TRPs every week to decide the content priorities, including for news bulletins. One even told me how TRPs are "guaranteed" well ahead. That was how TAM was using ratings for prescribing content priorities and promoting a content model in lieu of advertising support to channels. The ratings service has come into being and has been devised primarily to optimise the advertisements of big spenders, who are mostly the MNCs. That was how channels were lured by TAM to adopt a content model that would provide a boost to the markets and consumerism, and that was how the impact of TV so far had not been much on social development, governance and environment. Since the government allowed 100 percent FDI into the services, as if it had not visualised what it meant for the country in the long run, to that extent the government too facilitated the process of promoting a particular content model. As a result of all such calculated efforts of TAM, India missed an opportunity envisaged by Vikram Sarabhai.

NDTV is not the first channel to expose the fraud of TRPs. Zee TV had tried it earlier. It, in fact, boycotted the service for a while and was able to "sort out" with TAM. Doordarshan too tried with no "seriousness". I was invited as an expert by the CEO (K.S. Sarma) of Prasar Bharati to a crucial meeting with TAM/ Nielsen

executives from Singapore. They agreed to announce that TRPs were not "national", as was being claimed, but represented only urban TV households. They never kept up the promise. Yet, the CEO (abruptly) went out of the way to settle the "pending dues" to TAM, running into crores of rupees.

Ten years ago, when the list of TV households, where the meter was installed, was "leaked" and it was obvious that the sample was neither representative as claimed nor all the meters were in working order, no channel protested or withdrew from the TAM service. No matter how many TV households had installed meters, at least one-sixth (of the 8150 meters) were not working at any given time and as many were not representative TV households as was being claimed. But it did not bother anybody. Perhaps, that was why NDTV demanded a ban on TAM (Nielsen-Kantar). If NDTV could ask compensation for losses on capitalisation, profits and market shares because of TRPs, how about the people of India? They, too, could claim several times more compensation and take punitive actions against TAM/ Nielsen-Kantar.

Despite the deleterious role that the TRPs were playing in the country, there was never any effort independently or by the TRAI or the government to systematically assess its impact and study its use or to validate its methodology. We are made to believe that TRP was a surrogate indicator for viewing quality and impact. The secretary from the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting was present at the CMS round table on TRPs (2007). I had earlier (2005) briefed the minister about the adverse implication of TRPs and gave the details sought on the conflict of interests involving Nielsen. Yet, only in 2010, the Ministry appointed a committee (headed by Amit Mitra) as if to please the

media business barons, which finally led to no intervention or corrective steps. NDTV did better to expose the menace. Even TAM never tried to show its impact, except by way of increase in sales of so many brands in the market. Nor were there any academic efforts to study the merger of the two rating services earlier. Nor did they consider Justice Verma's suggestion for monthly reporting of ratings by TAM, instead of weekly. TRPs were never independently scrutinised. The only thing that was often talked about was the sample size, when in fact, the more critical aspect was its very relevance to the Indian scene and the conflict of interest aspect that determined the scope and methodology of TRPs. Another issue was how such channels were made to use TRPs in a misleading way.

A study by political scientists will reveal that despite proliferation of news channels, voters have not become more active or discriminative. A sociological study will show how the divides in the country on various grounds have been kept up by the content model being chased. A psychological study will bring out the linkages between viewership and increased crime, casteism, sex and similar deviant behaviour in the country, particularly among the young. There is a much bigger case for the Government to file a case against Nielsen /Kantar for the prolonged fraud. However, the government itself cannot escape the responsibility for facilitating the process over the years, however unwittingly.

The damages that TRPs/TAM have caused across India over the years is not inconsequential and is comparable to what the Bhopal gas leak tragedy. Thanks to NDTV for awakening us. ■