



April 2026

Telecom Regulatory Authority of India proposes bringing Free Ad-supported Streaming Television platforms under the Telecommunications Act, 2023

The Indian television broadcasting and distribution landscape is navigating a transition, driven by the rapid growth of Free Ad-supported Streaming Television (“FAST”) channels. While this segment has historically developed independently of the traditional licensing regime, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (“TRAI”), on April 6, 2026, released a [consultation paper](#) exploring the integration of Application-based Linear Television Distribution (“ALTD”) services and FAST platforms into the broader regulatory fold.

TRAI’s consultation paper follows the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting’s (“MIB”) [request for recommendations](#) from TRAI in relation to the regulatory differences between traditional broadcasting and FAST services on connected devices and other pre-loaded Original Equipment Manufacturers’ (“OEMs”) platforms.

Key insights

The impetus for regulation

The primary focus of this policy debate is the establishment of a consistent environment between traditional Distribution Platform Operators (“DPOs”) and emerging internet-based linear distributors. Historically, the distribution of linear television in India has been strictly governed by licensing regimes applicable to direct-to-home and cable operators. Conversely, FAST platforms and smart Television (“TV”) OEMs have been delivering live and linear television channels directly to consumers via the internet.

Traditional operators have submitted that the current lack of uniform oversight provides an asymmetric business advantage to FAST service providers. TRAI noted concerns regarding regulatory arbitrage and is assessing its impact on the regulated traditional broadcasting ecosystem.

1. Operational considerations:

- a) The consultation paper highlights the different requirements currently placed on cable providers who must comply with the [Guidelines for Uplinking and Downlinking of Satellite Television Channels in India, 2022](#). TRAI observed that FAST platforms presently operate under a different set of standards.
- b) While licensed broadcasters follow certain [programme and advertising codes](#), TRAI observed that FAST platforms are not required to.

2. **Proposed regulatory framework:** To standardise these practices, TRAI has recommended a new classification i.e., ALTD services. This segmentation would include all internet-based platforms delivering linear TV, regardless of whether accessed via pre-installed smart TV applications, downloadable mobile apps, or web-based interfaces.

It would apply irrespective of whether their underlying business model is ad-supported or subscription-based. Under this proposal, regulatory liability would be shared among the 'Application Providers', potentially including OEMs, operating system developers, and third-party content aggregators.

3. **Path to enforceability:** This consultation paper marks the beginning of a process to anchor these services within the [Telecommunications Act, 2023](#) ("**Telecom Act**"). The projected trajectory will likely follow these stages:
 - a) following the evaluation of the stakeholder comments (due in May 2026), TRAI will finalise and submit its recommendations to the MIB;
 - b) as outlined in TRAI's earlier recommendations dated February 21, 2025, the definition of 'telecommunication services' under the new Telecom Act is broad enough to encompass broadcasting. TRAI has already recommended that a separate authorisation for FAST channel distribution be established under the 'Television Channel Distribution Services'; and
 - c) Upon receiving TRAI's recommendations, the Central Government through the MIB can invoke its powers under Section 56 of the Telecom Act, to issue specific rules mandating ALTD and FAST providers to obtain a formal service authorisation under Section 3(1)(a) of the Telecom Act.

Conclusion

The Government's current direction suggests an attempt to standardise the regulatory treatment between traditional DPOs and FAST platforms. If adopted, the industry would transition to a regime characterised by mandatory authorisations, standardised content accountability, and tariff parity.

Telecommunications & Broadcasting Practice

Our Communications practice is handled by a team with specific domain-expertise, and we advise various stakeholders in both Telecom & Broadcasting sectors on a wide range of transactions and assignments that involve constitutional, legal, contractual, commercial, regulatory and policy advice. We advise broadcasters, BPOs, Internet Service Providers (ISPs), operators and investors in the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM) and the Code Division Multiple Access (CDMA) technologies, and new investors on diverse licensing issues, entry strategies, structuring, national security challenges, and other regulatory issues. Some of the main aspects handled / negotiated / advised by us include commercial arrangements; mergers & acquisitions (including FDI) and joint ventures; spectrum allocation; communication satellites; and regulatory compliances and strategic advice including handling regulatory proceedings. We represent the interests of licensees and other stakeholders in interacting with the licensor and regulators with respect to reforms in the regulatory and policy framework to facilitate business growth drawing upon international best practices. We advise and represent investors, broadcasters, and telecom licensees on commercial transactions in this sector, including restructuring, divestment, licensing, and project financing (vendor financing and corporate finance). We advise telecom service providers and other corporate houses on all aspects of spectrum licensing and allocation, including fundamental issues relating to the scope of spectrum bands, the regulatory framework governing their allocation in India, and planning, strategising and following up on their application to the Government. We advise and represent diverse entities in proceedings before the concerned licensing, regulatory, judicial and quasi-judicial authorities (including DoT, MIB, TRAI, TDSAT, various High Courts and the Supreme Court). In such proceedings we assist clients in developing strategies, render opinions, draft pleadings and lead/assist in the proceedings. We have a strong track-record of providing quality advice and concrete results to the above segments of the communications industry, and have been engaged in handling the key legal, regulatory and policy issues that have historically arisen in the industry.

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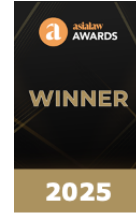
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