

Ownership Patterns Affecting the Content of 24 × 7 News Channels in India: A Critical Analysis

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News Media; especially the 24X7 TV news channels in India are facing constant criticism for practicing favoritism as a standard operating procedure, since 2014 general election. 2014 witnessed republican India's first intensively televised elections. As of March 2014, statistics released by I & B Ministry suggest that there are 792 TV channels in India in which 392 are the news and current affairs channels. These channels left no stone unturned in order to get scoop, breaking news, surveys and special programs during elections. However the intent as well content of coverage was always under deep scrutiny by one or other section of the society. This paper aims to present the facts behind such a disturbing perception. Is the influence of corporate ownership eaten the scope of objective reporting? Or, our society is functioning in such a way that they would like to see everything in white or, black and there is no scope for gray? That means either you are in support of a popular sentiment or you may face the threat to be labeled as anti-social or worst anti-national. However, there are sections who just want *news* to be back without any aggravated views. This paper aims to critically analyze all this aspect of contemporary electronic news channels.

Keywords: Paid news, Nepotism, News reporting, 24*7 news channels, Yellow journalism

INTRODUCTION

In 2014, India witnesses a paradigm shift in its political landscape. The end of decade long coalition government and a new guard at centre with the clear mandate changed the course of not only politics, but also the way politics were used to cover till date. News channels covered the election extensively. There were special programs, interviews, exit polls, post result analysis and other dedicated news bulletins. Though the scale of objectivity was, never seemed to be balanced and always appeared tilted in favor of some or other. The news channels were more seen as advancing an agenda of political outfits than reporting news objectively.

A political journalist *who supposed to be fair and unbiased*, applauding the good, and criticizing the bad caught in a dilemma with the change of power. Media houses were clearly divided into different camps. This situation was not less than walking on a two edge sword, where they need to maintain their credibility as well harnesses the revenue opportunities. First time India witnesses a presidential style campaign where faces were more prominent than issues and ideology. What we witnessed was a heated debate on TV channel where anchor was doing his best to criticize a particular party or its policies followed by the advertisements of the same political party promising the best days ahead during the break. This conflict of interest can be understood by the very fact that

the same corporations who donate for the political parties also have stakes in media houses. That is why they seem to be politically aligned and biased in reporting. This raises serious concerns about the free and fair dissemination of information in the wake of privately owned, profit driven media houses.

OBJECTIVE

Since the time of the first newspaper in India, i.e. Hicky's *The Bengal Gazette*, the ownership of media is always on hand of powerful elites who are or, likely to be, in close contact with the centre of power (read political parties in today's scenario). Things have not changed much even after independence. If we closely follow the ownership pattern of Indian Media Organizations, we may see a clear conflict of interest between what the viewers/readers would like to see/read and what their owner would like to reveal. This paper will systematically analyze the following:

1. The ownership pattern of news media organizations in India
2. The impact of news media ownership on nepotism

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Since the first newspaper of India *The Bengal Gazette*, started in 1780 by James Augustus Hickey, News Media is

playing a very important role to shape the opinion of the society. Most of the prominent leaders of India's Independence movement were a journalist in his own capacity. The great social reformer Raja Ram Mohun Roy was considered as the founder of the Indian Press by first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. During 1821 to 1822 he published "Brahmanical Magazine", "Sambad Kaumudi" and "Mirat-ul-Akhbar", as Bengal became the birthplace of Journalism and language press in India. Mahatma Gandhi too harnessed the power of mass media in South Africa and started "Indian Opinion" (June 1903) in English, Tamil and Gujarati to air the grievances of fellow countrymen. He later published as well edited papers like Young India, Navjivan, Harijan (English), Harijan Bandhu (Gujrati) and Harijan Sevak (Hindi). Mahatma Gandhi had some clear cut objective towards journalism:

1. To understand the outlook of the common man and giving expression to it
2. To stimulate certain desirable responses to the people
3. To fearlessly expose popular defects in the society

Here it is important to note that the paper published by Mahatma Gandhi carries no advertisements.

In the 1940s and 1950s the mass media were perceived as a powerful influence on behavior change. The "Hypodermic Needle Theory" or, "Magic Bullet Theory" implied mass media had a *direct, immediate* and *powerful* effect on its audiences. The theory suggests that the mass media could influence a very large group of people directly and uniformly by 'shooting' or 'injecting' them with appropriate messages intended to elicit a desired response. No escape route was supposed to be available in these models. The target population is seen as a helpless group. People are seen as passive and since a lot media material "shot" at them, they will eventually end up thinking what they are told because there is no other source of information.

However a new assessment that the Magic Bullet Theory was not accurate came out of election studies in "*The People's Choice*," (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1944/1968). The experiment was conducted during the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1940 to determine voting patterns and the relationship between the media and political behavior. However, on the contrary, to popular belief, the majority of people remained unaffected by the propaganda and surprisingly it was an interpersonal channel of communication that brought more persuasion than the media.

This experiment gave rise to the *two-step flow theory*. In the first step, those who have close access to the mass media

receive its messages and form their opinion on it. In the second stage, these opinion leaders attach their own opinion along with the original message and pass it to those who have less access to media content. In a way, these opinion leaders are proving to be quite influential in affecting the mandate of other people.

The two-step flow theory gave way to the multi-step flow theory of mass communication or diffusion of innovation theory. "Diffusion of Innovation" theory implies that media as well as interpersonal contacts provide information and influence opinion and judgment. E.M. Rogers (1995) argued that innovation consists of four stages: *invention, diffusion* (or communication) through the social system, *time* and *consequences*. The information flows through networks. The adaptation of innovation will depend on the kind of network one is associated with and the role of opinion leaders in that network.

The Agenda-setting theory in this context seems quite appropriate to describe the pervasive role of the media. Media has an important role in making the issues important. McCombs and Shaw investigated presidential campaigns in 1968, in which they focused on two elements: awareness and information. Two basis assumptions were used:

- (1) Media do not necessarily reflect the reality rather they select the content and shape it;
- (2) The content chosen and highlighted by the media is considered as more important than other issues.

The selection of time frame is one of the most critical aspects of the concept of an agenda-setting role of media. Media has the ability to raise some issues and make it to the top of the priority list of its recipients for the time being.

In the 80's, much attention in agenda-setting research was given to the concept of priming. Priming offers a prior context to the audience to set the tone of subsequent communication, by telling that what is good or bad? What should be credible? What are the issues of concern? etc. The concept of priming is implied by providing the audience with standards and frames of reference.

The concept of framing is also related to the agenda-setting theory. Framing focuses on the core of the issues than a particular topic. The basis of framing theory is that the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning.

Journalist selects the topic; frame it in a particular way that they want the people to think about it. Media spreads the message and draws public attention to that topic, in other words sets the agenda. These kinds of frame are built to influence the perception of the people not only to tell what to think about, but also how to think about it.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

This paper aims to present the change in the ownership pattern of news media and its impact on objective reporting. The corporate are investing in a big way in

PROMOTERS OF THE INDIAN NEWS CHANNELS AND THEIR POLITICAL LINKAGE

1. Zee News - Subhash Chandra, Promoter Essel Group, An aspirant for the BJP ticket from Hisar, in 2014 Haryana Assembly Election, supported BJP candidate Dr. Kamal Gupta against Savitri Jindal, who is the mother of former Congress MP and industrialist Naveen Jindal.
2. Network18 - Mukesh Ambani through *Independent Media Trust*, of which RIL is the sole beneficiary by funding of up to Rs. 40 billion for acquisition of control in Network18 and its subsidiaries.
3. NDTV - Radhika Roy and Prannoy Roy holds around 29.18% stake and 14.17% is owned by Abhey Oswal through *Oswal Greentech Limited* who is father-in-law of Congress Ex-MP and industrialist Naveen Jindal. Radhika Roy is sister of Rajya Sabha MP Brinda Karat who is wife of CPI(M) General Secretary, Prakash Karat.
4. SUN Group - Kalanithi Maran holds 77% share of *Kal Media Services Pvt. Ltd.* Who is the grand nephew of DMK president Karunanidhi.
5. News 24 - Anuradha Prasad managing director of BAG films and wife of Congress Rajya Sabha MP Rajeev Shukla. She is the sister of BJP MP Ravi Shankar Prasad who is present Union Minister of Communications and Information Technology.
6. IBN Lokmat - Marathi news channel owned by Vijay Darda (Congress Rajya Sabha MP) and Rajendra Darda (Congress Ex-MLA in Maharashtra)
7. India TV - Rajat Sharma, a former ABVP General Secretary
8. India News - India News is owned by Karthikeya Sharma, the owner of ITV Media group that also operates an English news channels News X. Karthikeya Sharma and Manu Sharma (Convicted in Jessica Lal murder case) are sons of Congress leader Venod Sharma.
9. Sahara India Parivar - Subarta Roy owns a fleet of national and regional news channel who is

media. They have their own political inclinations. Now this ownership pattern is changing the way media used to function or suppose to function. After Independence, except the days of emergency, the media largely remain free in this country. Even today there is no censorship of the media in India and they largely function with self-censorship. However, with the changing ownership pattern a serious threat has been arises and the side effects are somewhat evident too.

famous for hosting grand parties in his Sahara City, Lucknow for the entire union or state cabinet, whether it is Atal Bihari Vajpayee government or, socialist Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi party.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study would be a qualitative textual analysis, emphasizing the in-depth examination of the content. Manning and Cullum-Swan (1994) divide the analysis of documentary data into the following categories: "content and narrative analysis", "structuralism" and "semiotics". This system views texts as 'symbolic action' and assumes the role of words and images in representing, dramatizing and shaping society (Manning and Cullum-Swan, 1994: 465).

The content of Hindi news channels like Zee News, NDTV India, Aaj Tak, India TV etc. was accessed on a popular video sharing website YouTube, where most of the channels have put their content, especially those content which had larger TRP. Since the aim of this paper was to study the ownership pattern of news channels and its effect on the content they produced, therefore in-depth analysis of video content and the related discussion on social media websites were followed by the researcher.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Soon the result of Haryana and Maharashtra Assembly elections 2014 were out, Zee News started playing stories depicting his Chairman Subhash Chandra campaigning in favor of BJP candidate Dr. Kamal Gupta and sharing stage with PM Narendra Modi, and crediting the result to the hard work and familiarity of Subhash Chandra with the Hisar constituency. Zee News is fighting a legal battle with the Congress, Ex-MP and industrialist Naveen Jindal over an extortion case.

Noted Journalist "Punya Prason Vajpayee" described the change in the landscape of media-political relationship with a hint of introspection; "In the past decade, journalists became the stakeholder of media organization and those who owns media conglomerates became the journalist. After 16th May 2014, when the result of the general election was declared, the country witnessed the paradigm shift of the inner conflicts of media organizations. The fourth pillar of democracy was no longer standing together and there was a deep divide among them. Earlier media was used to hide their differences to take on political conflicts, but when the era of fragmented political mandate ended there was a rush to take a clear stand in terms of ideology".

It was evident from an incidence when PM Narendra Modi was delivering a speech in front of an elated audience of around 20,000, at *Madison Square Garden* in New York City on Sunday, September 28, 2014. Mr. Rajdeep Sardesai, a very well known journalist from India got caught in a scuffle with Pro-Modi supporters outside the venue, as they were waiting and cheering on for the PM's arrival. Due to the abusive language used and the physical nature of the fight, as well as popularity of Mr. Rajdeep, the video went viral extremely fast. It was first tweeted by Financial Times correspondent James Fontanella Khan from his twitter handle @JFK_America *"Mob of people attacking an Indian journalist for being critical of Modi on the past. Accused if being a traitor"*.

Later Rajdeep Sardesai, known for his scuffle with PM Modi, and who was consequently forced to resign from Network 18 post the group was acquired by Mukesh Ambani despite of being a stake holder in the organization, tweeted a series of tweets from his twitter handle @sardesairajdeep *"Great crowd at Modison square garden! except a few idiots who still believe abuse is a way of proving their machismo! #ModiAtMadison"; "Super speech by Modi; not so super behaviour by some bhakts. Guess some things won't change"; "First, Kick and abuse while I am on cam asking questions, then release video selectively. Rule of the mob."*

The immediate response on LIVE television came from Sudhir Chaudhary of Zee News who is known for his proximity with BJP along with his group; @sudhirchaudhary *"You don't ask provocative questions to an emotionally charged crowd leading to anger all around & then play victim.4/n #ShameAbroad"*

The immediate reply came from @sardesairajdeep "Sorry folks, won't respond to lies of channel/editors caught on tape seeking bribes and sent to jail. Supari 'journalism' at its worst."

Few others like journalist turned politician of *Aam Aadmi Party* Ashutosh too jump into this by supporting Rajdeep through his tweet; @ashutosh83B *#IStandWithRajdeep attack on Rajdeep is not an isolated incident, it's an attempt to subjugate independent media /independent voices. #Shame*

This kind of counter attack distorts any possibilities of coming the real picture out when the focus is on mud sledging. What happened at Madison Square Garden was not portrayed as a scuffle between a journalist and a person; rather it became the personal fight between two ideologies; one who is claiming to be more liberal and other who is more nationalist.

In 2013, Prannoy Roy led NDTV celebrated their 25th Anniversary in President House in the presence of the President of India, in UPA regime. The result of political proximity of NDTV with UPA and its impact on news reporting may be assessed by a video surfacing the YouTube in which NDTV anchor "Nidhi Kulpati" was caught saying someone that "defend the news by taking the side of Congress party" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cltCoiVvmF8>

On December 2nd, 2014, IndiaTV celebrated the 21st year of their popular TV Show "Aap Ki Adalat", and the attendee was no less than the President, Prime Minister and his Cabinet, other politicians and three superstar Khans of Bollywood among others. The question is that how a journalist will have the moral right to question the corrupt practices when his organization is spending millions to send a political signal to its viewers as well as rivals?

On November 26, 2014, on the eve of the sixth anniversary of the Mumbai terror attacks, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has appealed to people to donate Rs. 2,611 to party coffers for the forthcoming assembly polls in the state.

Zee News is known for its anti AAP stand, reacted sharply in their program "Taal Thok Ke" with the question that; Is Arvind Kejriwal trying to encash 26/11 Mumbai terror attack? A heated debate among panelist started who raised serious allegations about the credibility of the channel as well participants of the debate. Senior Journalist "Abhey Dubey" accused anchor "Rohit Sardana" to forcing the direction of the debate in favor of BJP and making it anti AAP. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0sGAslVGCgI>

CONCLUSION

Numerous such examples could be cited in which the news media construct images in favor of their political patrons. When the political mandate was fragmented,

media was also not clearly aligned; however the election of 2014 changed the political landscape and the way of functioning of media organizations. Like any other business media is also profit driven. Big corporate are buying huge stakes in media or completely owned it. At the same time media owners are changing shoes with

politicians. This poses a serious concern about the future of journalism and its independence. The actual loser in all this is a viewer who still wants to believe in the power and sanity of the fourth pillar of democracy. Who doesn't want the aggravated views, but simple news, which is supposed to be delivered by mass media.

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