

## **THE POLITICS OF MEDIA FRAMING: HOW POLITICS SHAPE REPORTING IN INDIA**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

The active engagement of citizens in political communication and political literacy is crucial for meaningful political participation in a country. The Indian elections serve as a demonstration of the country's strong democracy. People's voting patterns can be influenced by various factors, including the media. The media plays a vital role in providing political information to the public. With this in mind, the paper aims to address whether the media is influenced by politics and the reasons behind political parties and politicians manipulating the news to suit their interests. Partisan media poses a threat to democracy, and for a dynamic democratic nation like India, the independence of the press is essential.

**Keywords:** Political Communication, Political Participation, Voting behavior, Elections, Democracy, Media

A person who is politically educated is not the same as an intelligent person. In order for a political party to be in power or to be in opposition, political communication is crucial. Partisan media's persuasive misinformation, manipulation, and factual distortions steal a significant portion of the pie. The media is praised for being the guardian of democracy, forcing the opposition and ruling parties to answer to the public by acting as a mirror.

Albert Camus once rightly said "A free press can, of course, be good or bad, but, most certainly without freedom, the press will never be anything but bad." A free democratic environment is necessary for an unbiased press to thrive. However, it is difficult to address the question of whether the media is ever objective. So, why do media outlets sometimes give in to the will of those in positions of power?

According to American philosopher Noam Chomsky, the media in democratic countries is not fully independent and fails to adequately inform citizens, particularly about the state's overreach. Instead, it engaged in what he termed "manufacturing consent" for the government and commercial interests. (Herman & Chomsky, 1988)

To put it simply, we may grasp broad factors like appeasement, fear and political leaders' association with news organizations. To begin, in order to survive, the media often appeases the government in order to reap financial rewards and prevent possible problems. This was reflected in India during the Emergency. Indira Gandhi's emergency was supported by print media firms such as The Hindustan Times and The Times of India, as well as journalists such as Kushwant Singh. According to Indu B. Singh, Mrs. Gandhi used government advertising to control the press and news agency mergers, as well as fear-mongering techniques against newspaper publishers, journalists, and shareholders.

In a 2019 interview with Reuters, a Times Group executive stated that the government accounts for approximately 15% of the company's advertising. The advertisements mostly promote government contract tenders and government projects. And corporate leaders of ABP group in an interview with Reuters, have indicated that The ABP Group, which publishes The Telegraph, when ran reports criticizing Modi's record on national concerns, has experienced a 15% decline in government advertisements for roughly six months.

The impediment to true media independence is a heavy reliance on advertising revenues.

Because of the increasingly blurred distinctions between channels - both newspapers and TV networks own websites that compete with similar digital-only websites - news is no longer news, but content. Following the demonetization in 2016, AajTak aired a program hosted by Shweta Singh, in which she explained that the new 2000 rupee note contained nanotechnology GPS. This might be

considered as a propaganda presentation for the then-in-power BJP, when many economists, including Manmohan Singh, harshly condemned the government's choice to quickly announce demonetization, heavily damaging the economy and the lives of the population.

Christophe Jaffrelot and VihangJumle's study of 1779 debates on Republic TV, widely regarded as the mouthpiece of the BJP government, published on The Caravan, explains that in 2019, there were 119 pro-BJP debates, 236 anti-opposition debates, and only 14 anti-BJP debates. This illustrates the skewed narrative the partisan media gives to the public.

During the 2020 India-China border tensions, media outlets like Republic TV and Times Now promoted a narrative implying that questioning the BJP government's intentions made one unpatriotic. These channels depicted an idealized image of India's alleged victory despite conflicting statements from various government sources. Prime Minister NarendraModi stated "no one has encroached on our territory or captured any posts," while the Ministry of Defence contradicted him by reporting "an increase in Chinese transgressions over the Line of Actual Control (LAC)."

The news channels avoided providing impartial analysis of the situation and instead questioned the motives of opposition leaders for challenging the decisions made by the Modi government. The opposition was criticized for allegedly "undermining the nation" and "supporting the enemy," while their consistent praise of the BJP indicates their alignment with government policies and serves to validate government perspectives.

In instances where attempts at conciliation prove ineffectual, coercive methods were utilized to control the media. Journalists in India who voiced dissent against the government's policies were singled out and prosecuted under sedition and anti-terrorism statutes. A study titled "Watch the State" documented 256 instances of aggression against media personnel, with the majority occurring in states governed by the BJP. Sabrina Siddiqui, White House writer for the Wall Street Journal, was harassed for many days by the BJP's internet troll army after querying Modi about minority rights during his visit to the United States. During the COVID-19 pandemic in India, the government tried to suppress coverage of the actual situation by compelling journalists to publish only authorized information. SagarikaGhose, a columnist for the Times of India, has revealed that she faces severe online persecution whenever she criticizes the government. She has disclosed that she has been subjected to death threats and threats of gang rape.

The leaked list of potential eavesdropping targets uncovered by the Pegasus Project contains more than 40 Indian journalists. This fosters a climate of unchecked surveillance, leading to a stifling impact on freedom of expression and media liberties.

In India, many politicians have investments in or ownership of media companies, leading to news being tailored to the preferences of the owning party. According to a MOM analysis, certain politicians have stakes in media firms. Baijayant Jay Panda is the owner of Odisha TV and serves as the National Vice President and Spokesperson for the BharatiyaJanata Party (BJP). Meanwhile, in Assam, RinikiBhuyanSarma, the wife of HimantaBiswaSarma, is in charge of the television program NewsLive.

Malayalam Communications Limited, supported by the CPI(M), holds ownership of Kairali TV and People's TV. In March 2009, Telugu TV channel Sakshi TV was established by Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy's company, Indira Television Ltd. Presently, the company is managed by Y S Bharathi Reddy, Jagan Mohan's wife. The most well-liked channel is Sun TV, which is overseen by Kalanidhi, the elder brother of DMK MP DayanidhiMaran, while KalaignarSeithigal is directly run by the DMK. Chandrasekhar previously invested in Republic TV but stepped down as a board director of ARG Outlier Asianet News Private Limited, the operator of the news channel, in 2018 after joining the BJP.

The presence of politicians in charge of news networks results in them becoming echo chambers rather than facilitating genuine discourse and reporting the truth to the public. Over the past few years, all debates and news programs have adhered to a uniform pattern, presenting audiences with a

superficial facade and one-sided perspective. As a result, genuine news is concealed, and people are kept unaware of the actual facts.

The 2024 Digital News Report Survey, carried out by the Reuters Institute and the University of Oxford, reveals that print (40%) and television (46%) remain the favored mediums for consuming news. Political communication is essential for a political party to gain or retain power. It's vital for the public to have awareness of a political party's policies and initiatives when supporting it. When media channels prioritize parties over offering impartial news, people are exposed to fake or fabricated news rather than real news, which significantly affects voting behavior.(Verma&Sardesai, 2014)

The accountability of politicians should be upheld by journalists, and they should safeguard the welfare of the nation's people. However, democracy is endangered by biased media, which hides the truth from the public. Unbiased media is crucial for the effective governance of the country. Legal action should be taken against media outlets that spread fake and misleading news. The Indian constitution guarantees freedom of opinion and expression, including free press.

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