
THE INDIAN MEDIA ACTORS AND THEIR ROLE IN THE INDIAN POLITICS AND DEMOCRACY

Vipul Vedant, Jindal Global Law School

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The aim of this paper is to examine the relationship between media and politics in India with a focus on media structure, media actors, and media ownership in the context of the role of media in modern democratic regimes. In liberal democracy, media actors play a significant role; political elites commonly use media to manipulate the masses and obtain approval to reproduce their dominant ideology, and media discourses form the masses' views and desires. There are two parts to this paper. The first section establishes a theoretical structure for the relationship between media and politics. A literature review on the subject is also included in this section. The second section will be a discussion section that will examine the position of the media in Indian politics as well as media ownership practises and their influence.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

This indagation seeks to investigate the independence of media as prevalent in India. The study will cull out the role of politics as a driving force used either in enhancing or affecting such autonomy, along with analysing atrocities being witnessed as a result of such autonomous behaviour.

INTRODUCTION

The research's main argument is that a free and independent media is needed to empower democratic rule in a nation, and that the Indian experiment is not an outlier. As an observed fact, there exists a clear relationship between the masses and the political elites. The public opinion is majorly construed as an essential ingredient of the democracy and hence the government policies in modern democracies are typically influenced by the society members. The mass media can be considered as the main instrument in the relationship between the democratic societies and the public sentiments. Moreover, apart from the judiciary, executive, and legislative branches, the media is regarded as the fourth estate of democracy. It can be thought of as a government relations 'watchdog' to monitor and question as the correspondents

perform numerous 'democratic functions such as scrutinizing crucial information, conducting prima facie investigations, mobilizing people, and educating the mass'¹. Consequently, media freedom is critical for democracies to overthrow situations of blatant injustice where an alleged misconduct is undermined because of the suppressed freedom. For instance, the recent case in the state of Uttar Pradesh where the 'rape victim's body (Hathras Rape Case) was allegedly burnt by the police officials at midnight'². Had it not been media, such an incident could have been easily covered up. The essence of the case is obviously to be interpreted and decided by the Hon'ble Court, but the doubt it raises to a prudent person is crucial and such a report must be widely promulgated.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Journalism performs tasks such as providing information, conducting investigations, and providing a public forum for society. India's media landscape is evolving, with thousands of outlets operating in multiple languages, the country has undergone systemic change in recent years. For example, in the case of "*Arup Bhuyan vs State of Assam*"³, the Indian Supreme Court adopted the Brandenburg principle, which states that no clause of the constitution authorises a state to limit or forbid the exercise of free speech and press unless and until an extraordinary situation occurs that poses an **immediate** danger. The main goal of this essay is to find answers to the following questions:

1. How would you define India's media profile in relation to politics?
2. In India, what is the essence of the media-politics relationship?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

A. Relationship Between Media And Politics

Because of the adoption of digital journalism, the concept of "press freedom" now carries more weight in political debates than it did in previous decades. The public's relationship with the ruling elites will only be healthy if the press has freedom of speech, which is a bare minimum

¹ Michael Schudson, *How to Think Normatively About News and Democracy* (2017), https://www.academia.edu/28188814/How_to_Think_Normatively_About_News_and_Democracy_How_to_Think_Normatively_About_News_and_Democracy_The_Oxford_Handbook_of_Political_Communication (last visited Apr 27, 2021).

² Tanushree Pandey, *First person account: A harrowing, sleepless night in Hathras as UP Police kept out family and cremated rape victim* India Today (2020), <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/hathras-up-police-family-cremate-rape-victim-first-person-account-1726853-2020-09-30> (last visited Apr 27, 2021).

³ (2011) 3 SCC 377.

for a robust democracy. One of the key roles of the media, as a vital agent in the dissemination of knowledge, is to provide a sphere from which the general public can access information. However, it should be remembered that the ‘media obtains the majority of information from official outlets in order to fill the news gap on a regular basis in a more cost-effective manner, which makes it difficult to produce accurate news’⁴. It should be remembered that in today's cultures, citizens must be properly educated in order to vote on both domestic and foreign policy matters. The media, as a source of knowledge for the general public, is critical in democracies. According to the framing hypothesis, ‘how the news is interpreted on various topics has a big impact on how political debates are reflected’⁵. In other words, framing theory can be interpreted as ‘a process by which newsmakers select certain aspects of reality while leaving others out’⁶. News has a direct impact on the public's view of social and political activities, and media reports of particular political events have a general impact on political outcomes. Political rivalry is strong in democratic regimes as a result of the presence of plural and autonomous media players, and every political player has a say in the media scene. Every country's media systems vary in terms of their political, economic, and social characteristics. The structure and modes of media ownership are influenced by political relations with the economic system and the legal framework. The general functioning and activities of the media actors in a country are determined by the legal system in the field of communication. The media in many countries seems to represent the needs of the ruling classes. Furthermore, also in democratic countries, ‘the media is often used as a tool for manufacturing approval, that is, growing public acceptance of government policies and decisions’⁷. Institutions such as the media actors, according to Hallin, are part of the process of producing and reproducing an ideology that is consistent with the current power configuration in society⁸. Today's media actors often serve the needs of society's ruling classes or affluent actors; as a result, marginalised communities such as women and ethnic minorities are often misrepresented or underrepresented in the media. This may be construed as a direct challenge to democracy. Furthermore, it should be remembered that the intimate association between insiders and media owners jeopardises media independence and plurality. Political and economic constraints on

⁴ W. L. Bennett, “*Toward a Theory of Media-State Relations in the United States*” (1990), p. 105-107, <https://web.stanford.edu/class/comm1a/readings/bennett-press-state.pdf> (last visited Apr 29, 2021).

⁵ Sunday Olasunkanmi Arowolo, *UNDERSTANDING FRAMING THEORY*, ResearchGate, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317841096_UNDERSTANDING_FRAMING_THEORY (last visited Apr 29, 2021).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (2017).

⁸ Daniel Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (1988), p. 213.

media owners and practitioners obstruct citizens' access to accurate information. Furthermore, media actors sometimes influence the public in order to serve the interests of political power. From time to time, media actors portray other cultures, customs, civilizations, and religious beliefs in a negative light. This also supports the dominant ideology and serves the interests of the society's influential classes, which may lead to democratic erosion in the long run. The role of the media in the political socialisation process, on the other hand, is critical when studying the media-politics relationship. As an independent political communication mechanism between various groups within a society, the media contributes to citizens' understanding, especially during election times, as well as in cases of misuse of power and political crisis.

B. Role of Media in the Indian Politics

‘I would like this government to be chastised. Democracy is strengthened by criticism. Without constructive criticism, democracy will fail’⁹. In 2014, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke the aforesaid. As the Modi government grappled with a growing economic crisis at home and increasing tensions across the region, the Prime Minister took measures to stifle free speech. The lack of an efficient and autonomous regulatory regime is an important aspect of today's study of media freedoms in India. The topic of ads is an important point to emphasize when addressing the media and politics relationship in India. Advertising, in addition to direct ownership, provides a means of leverage over editorial material, as media is increasingly reliant on advertising revenues. Financial difficulties render media organisations more vulnerable to such reliance, which erodes media expression and pluralism. The Indian government is known to have used advertisement campaigns to reward and punish the Indian media in 2019. In 2020 the administration declared that it will cease advertisement spending for the three largest English language newspapers, The Telegraph, Times of India, and The Hindu. The decision was made after articles critical of the government appeared in all three newspapers. ‘When media companies in India do not cooperate with the government, the government reduces advertisement revenue as a form of punishment’¹⁰. English newspapers published in India were primarily concerned with domestic political affairs until the 1980s and 1990s, when they became influential in terms of circulation, technology, and earnings, as well as in shaping the press. However, both in terms of numbers and local print and distribution, Hindi newspapers

⁹ Aman Madan, India's Not-So-Free Media The Diplomat (2019), <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/indias-not-so-free-media/> (last visited May 1, 2021).

¹⁰ Aman Withnall, How Modi government uses ad spending to 'reward or punish' Indian media The Independent (2019), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/india-modi-government-media-ad-spending-newspapers-press-freedom-a8990451.html> (last visited May 4, 2021).

have made significant progress. Newspapers are read more than ever before. Political issues are often addressed in both local and regional newspapers with a large circulation. It's no coincidence that India's political core shifted from New Delhi to regional centres at the same time that the mother tongue press began to gain traction. In the sense of India's media and democracy, media broadcasting in the mother tongue was frowned upon. While the English press is held up as a standard in developing countries, these newspapers, which are not read by a significant portion of the population, have been found to be politically and ethically problematic. The Hindu nationalist movement, on the other hand, reacted favourably to Hindu newspapers. It should be noted that Indian journalism's long tradition of focusing on national politics with high elitism and urban centrism has shifted over time. There is a localization and commodification of news nowadays. In today's Indian media environment, media actors not only serve as intermediaries between public opinion and policymakers, but also as important shapers of public opinion. The newspapers *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, *The Hindu*, and *National Herald* have all played a significant role in forming and expressing public opinion. In the age of tele-media, India, on the other hand, can be said to have witnessed the rise of Hindu nationalism. Another significant change in India's media-politics relationship is the country's economic growth. The Indian media has had a close relationship with political and financial actors, especially since the 1990s, when the Indian market was opened to foreign investment. This progress paved the way for the transformation of the media industry from a publicly owned to a privatised one. The shift in the media hierarchy resulted in significant shifts in media ownership. It is obvious that the control of the media has a huge impact on the viewpoints reflected in news coverage and editorial material. Various regional news channels in India are partially or entirely owned by Indian political leaders. Politics and the media are inextricably linked because regional political parties play an important role in Indian politics because they are adept at reaching out to the general public. When examining the relationship between the media and politics, it is important to remember that the 'majority of the Indian media is specifically shaped by those with political influence'¹¹. More significantly, there are no regulatory protections in place in India to protect media outlets from political control. With the exception of radio, legal mechanisms are insufficient to restrict political ownership of television and print media. One of the major factors leading to the challenge to India's media

¹¹ Media and Political affiliation in India: Media Monitor India, Media Ownership Monitor, <https://india.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/politicalaffiliations/> (last visited May 5, 2021).

freedoms is the question of media ownership. In addition, India's media freedoms need an efficient and autonomous regulatory framework today.

SOLUTION AND CONCLUSION

The media-politics relation is among the most important indicators of a country's democratic governance efficiency. In liberal democracy, a free and independent media is an indispensable player. It serves as both a watchdog and an actor of surveillance over the government's anti-corruption operations, providing information to the public on a variety of topics ranging from politics to the economy and foreign affairs. It is worth noting that the greater the government's pressure on media actors, the weaker the accountability and transparency values in a political regime become. Media and politics have always had a close relationship and have always communicated with one another. Political interference should be kept out of the reporting and monitoring functions of the media. To protect media freedoms, **a well-functioning regulatory regime, as well as institutions and legal regulations, must be created.** The media's biggest issue in India is the ownership structure of the media. Media ownership is concentrated in the hands of a tiny group of insiders with specific political or financial links, allowing democracy to deteriorate. Additionally, the key factor undermining media freedoms in India is the use of ads as a weapon for reward and retribution by political leaders. Since they need to make money to survive, media actors are unable to operate openly in editorial and reporting processes. India's media industry is expanding at a faster rate than the country's economy. It does not, however, serve as a watchdog for elites and political affairs. It is important to note that not only India, but every country, should set the goal of providing an acceptable environment for media actors to be able to produce news and reporting in an open and free manner based on editorial independence that serves the public interest. Lastly, as a note of positive remark, it has been observed over the years, that the independence and the reporting rights of the media has been widely prevented from being jeopardised. For example, the media (especially in India) initially were not subjected to any universal rule according to which the speech should have been judged for its validity, or capacity to incite hatred. The freedom was often curtailed on the name of sedition, and it was very necessary to establish a uniform approach to determine the reasonableness of the speech. The courts have travelled a long way to change the interpretations, reasonable enough for the 21st century. Starting from cases like "*S. Rangarajan Etc vs P. Jagjivan Ram*¹²" where a test of 'spark in a powder keg' was performed. The test was

¹² 1989 SCR (2) 204.

vague in its approach because there never existed a certainty as to what will constitute a spark to incite a mob, or will lead to sedition. All such vagueness was finally resolved in *Arup Bhuyan*¹³ where a test as prevalent in the United States was incorporated. It is the future that will determine whether the most recent understanding laid the groundwork for more radical proposals or whether the essence would dwindle and fade.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Arowolo Olasunkanmi, UNDERSTANDING FRAMING THEORY, RESEARCHGATE, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317841096_UNDERSTANDING_FRAMING_THEORY (last visited Apr 29, 2021).
2. Daniel Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (1988).
3. HERMAN EDWARD, *MANUFACTURING CONSENT: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE MASS MEDIA* (2017).
4. Madan Aman, INDIA'S NOT-SO-FREE MEDIA THE DIPLOMAT (2019), <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/indias-not-so-free-media/> (last visited May 1, 2021).
5. Media and Political affiliation in India: Media Monitor India, MEDIA OWNERSHIP MONITOR, <https://india.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/politicalaffiliations/> (last visited May 10, 2021).
6. Pandey Tanushree, FIRST PERSON ACCOUNT: A HARROWING, SLEEPLESS NIGHT IN HATHRAS AS UP POLICE KEPT OUT FAMILY AND CREMATED RAPE VICTIM INDIA TODAY (2020), <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/hathras-up-police-family-cremate-rape-victim-first-person-account-1726853-2020-09-30> (last visited Apr 27, 2021).
7. Schudson Michael, *HOW TO THINK NORMATIVELY ABOUT NEWS AND DEMOCRACY* (2017).
8. Withnall Aman, HOW MODI GOVERNMENT USES AD SPENDING TO 'REWARD OR PUNISH' INDIAN MEDIA THE INDEPENDENT (2019), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/india-modi-government-media-ad-spending-newspapers-press-freedom-a8990451.html> (last visited May 1, 2021).

¹³ *supra* note 3.