Why Do TV News Bulletins Have To Be Always Cluttered?

Foreword by
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CMS media lab

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Content

A laudable study

We all are witness to revolutionary technological advancements in the realm of the science of broadcasting. And we also understand that communication is the basic objective of all broadcasting activity. When the communication itself is impeded, no matter how sophisticated the technology used, broadcasting becomes meaningless. I admire the efforts being made by the Centre for Media Studies (CMS) to scientifically analyze the media tendencies that are hindering the effective conveyance of the intended message. Hope the findings of the study conducted by the Centre would help evolve practices that would turn TV viewing into a much happier experience.

Ramoji Rao
October 23, 2010   *Chairman, Eenadu Group*

Preface

This monograph is brought out with a hope that it will provoke news media to take a fresh look into the usage of screen space on a television bulletin. Obviously, more research and innovation is required and desirable for designing and utilization of the screen space. While competition compels experimentation, newer news room technologies and software facilitates offers more effective ways of presentation.

In the last 20 years, CMS must have brought out more than 40 such publications on a range of concerns and issues involved in media practices and policies, including on research methodologies. Our efforts are to provide an informed discourse leading to a more accountable and thriving media in our country.

We are glad to have Shri Ramoji Rao, *Chairman, Eenadu Group* comment on this study and for the foreword for this latest publication. On this subject of screen clutter of news bulletins, we would like to hear from channels themselves on why and how they do this.

Please feel free to send us any suggestions and comments on this study and publication.

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Summary Highlights of CMS Study on TV News Screen Usage

- News bulletins of 77 news and current affairs channels in 11 languages (carried by DTH networks) are covered in this study. They reflect the larger picture of news bulletins in the country. The ones left out are either relatively new or local or not available on DTH. CMS Media Lab at New Delhi and Hyderabad took the initiative for this study.

- Six business news channels are also covered – both in English and Hindi.

- For comparative analysis, four News channels down linked from outside the country are covered.

- In the case of Telugu, 12 of the 14 news channels were covered and additionally two other Telugu channels which carry news bulletins, are also given.

- Doordarshan first initiated news bulletins in Hindi – one initially and then two bulletins a day and later 24-hour news channel with hourly news bulletin.

- Then came Zee TV (1995) and Star TV (1998), Aaj Tak (2000) and NDTV and thereafter 24–hour news channels followed and proliferated. Some News channels are now completing 15 years in India.

- News bulletins have come a long way in terms of their scope, coverage and technical quality.

- To what extent proliferation of news channels has increased viewership beyond what it was? - is an issue for a special discussion. But in terms of use of screen space of news bulletins, what is the status? This is the objective of the study as indicated in the next few pages by the screen illustrations of news bulletins.

- The tendency to follow a similar format and pattern of using the screen is quite obvious and across languages.

- Intense Competition in presenting news is expected to compel experimentation and innovations - resulting in some differentiation between news channels within and across bulletins of different languages. This was not evident in this study.

- Falling into a "TRP trap" (which we brought out in 1998) appears to be one explanation for the clutter on screens of 24-hour news channel bulletins, in all languages.

- News bulletins of non-news channels, like that of regional Doordarshan and ETV were found to be more focused.

- Suggestions to take forward this study are welcome.

Table 1: Number of Channel Screens Covered for the Analysis

S.No	Language	Number of Channels Covered
1	Hindi	17
2	Telugu	14
3	Malayalam	6
4	Business	6
5	English	5
6	Bengali	5
7	Kannada	4
8	Marathi	4
9	Tamil	3
10	Assamese	2
11	Gujarati	2
12	Punjabi	5
13	Foreign	4
	Total	**77**

Hindi News Bulletins

Aaj Tak

CNEB
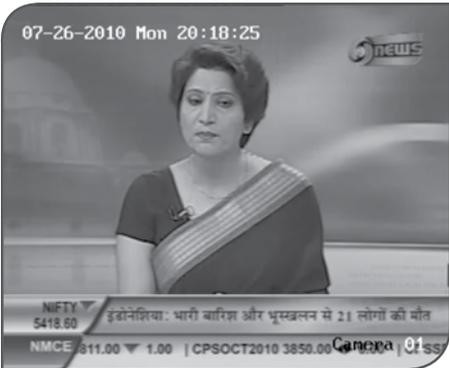
DD News

IBN 7
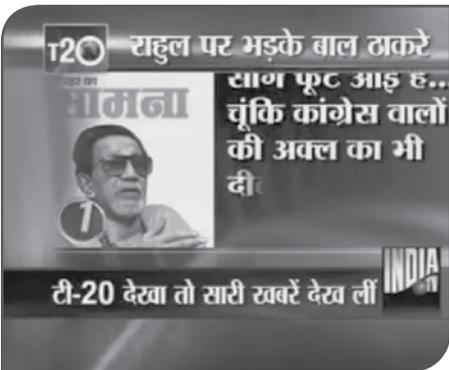
India TV

Live India

Hindi News Bulletins

NDTV India

P7
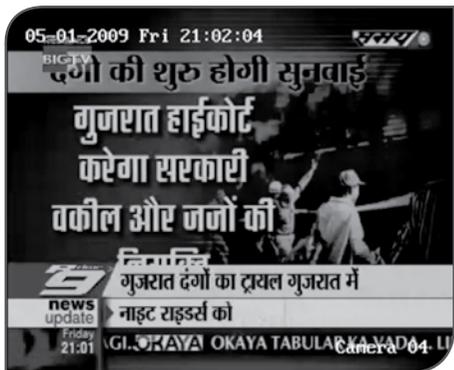
Sahara Samay

Star News

Tez

Total TV

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Hindi News Bulletins

TV 100

Zee News

Bihar (Hindi & Bhojpuri) News Bulletins

ETV Bihar

Hamar TV

Sahara Bihar

DD Saptagiri

ETV

ETV 2

Gemini News

HMTV

I News

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Telugu News Bulletins

Mahaa TV

NTV

Raj News

Sakshi TV

Studio N

TV 5
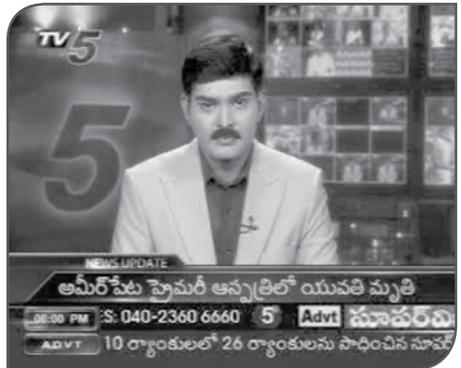
TV 9

Zee 24 Gantalu

Assamese News Bulletins

DY 365

News Live

Gujarati News Bulletins

ETV Gujarati

TV 9 Gujarati

Malayalam News Bulletins

Amrita TV

Asianet News

Jaihind TV

Jeevan TV

Kairali TV

Manorama News

Business News Bulletins

Bloomberg UTV

CNBC

CNBC Awas

ET Now

NDTV Profit

Zee Business

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CNN IBN

NDTV 24x7

News X
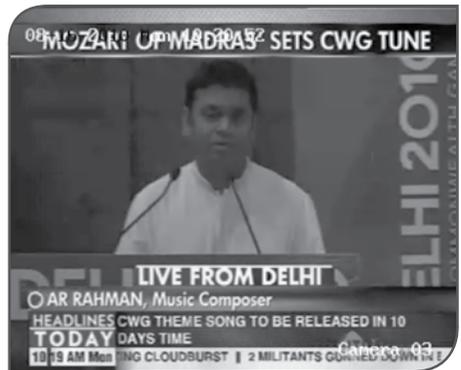
Headlines Today

Times Now

Bengali News Bulletins
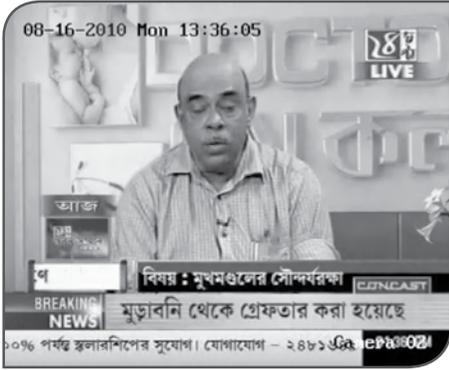
24 Ghanta

Kolkata TV

Ne Bangla

Star Ananda

Tara Newz

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Punjabi News Bulletins

Day & Night News

MH 1

PTC News

Punjab Today

Zee Punjabi

ETV Kannada

Kasturi

Suvarna News
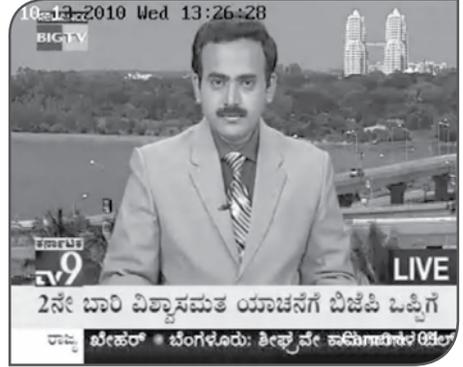
TV 9 Kannada

Marathi News Bulletins

ETV Marathi

IBN Lokmat

Star Majha

Zee 24 Tass

Tamil News Bulletins

Kalaignar TV

Jaya TV

Mega TV

Why Do TV News Bulletins Have To Be Always Cluttered?

Foreign News Bulletins

Al Jazeera

BBC World

CNN

Russia Today

Why do TV news bulletins have to be always cluttered?

In the barrage of 24 hour news channels across the country, the presentation and layout of the screen space becomes particularly relevant and critical – both to provide information and also to attract viewers.

This CMS study focuses on visibility of news bulletins in terms of screen space use of television news bulletins. Competing to give more information is natural for news channels and is a welcome feature. But this however should not mean crowding the screen so much that subject comprehension levels are affected. Are the news bulletins for seeing and listening or for reading? The whole screen of news bulletin is so jumbled / cluttered and over loaded that it is difficult to make out and distinguish as to which part of the screen is news, advertisement, opinion or an announcement. And, this is usually in the entire duration of the bulletin, not just at any one point.

This ongoing study is analyzing the screen space of prime time news bulletins of 77 news channels and has found that on an average there are 5 points of information or elements – while the logo and the anchor are usually the stable and common information elements, the other three are two moving scrolls, usually at the bottom of the screen and an additional box of information that is generally some score or promotion or even an advertisement. However, there are some screens which have almost 9 to 11 points of information at any given time.

In the past few years, television news channels have begun to reformat their screen presentations to include scrolling screens, sports scores, stock prices, current weather news and even advertisements. Visual presentation and new age graphics are also important determinants of individual television channel identity and branding. Hence, no matter which channel one turns to on television, there is high likelihood of finding visual elements that seems to clutter the screen - making it difficult to focus on one thing.

It's getting to the point where everything in TV news has an on-screen tag, and the packaging is so thick one can hardly find the content. Heavy graphics with multiple colors, fonts, sizes, boxes and shapes are creating new visual grammar on screen- sometimes even defying basic design principles. Logos and labels, scores and statistics, headlines and advertisements-the clutter is out of control.

Three in one & together!

The trend toward visual clutter has also reshaped television news broadcasts, where the familiar sight of a lone anchor talking to a camera has grown increasingly rare. It's one thing for specialized channels like all-business and all-sports channels to run on-screen tickers: their viewers often tune in just to check a particular stock or score. But the effect of adding multiple lines of ticker-style text to the average news bulletin is that many viewers are simply unable to process it all.

Audience are required to see the news story more, not read so much or try to decipher from on-screen clutter involved in seeing, listening and reading - unlike in the case of a newspaper and radio. In the process, to catch up with news in a news bulletin, viewers have to muddle through and unleash their listening skills and test their reading abilities too. Only then they are able to get the "full story" or get none or only partly or selectively of what is being put out in the news bulletin at any given point.

The assumption of channels seems that most viewers can simultaneously read, listen and see on screen, various elements of information that are not always connected or interrelated. While some viewers may be comfortable with the crowding if the elements are all related to the same topic, most news bulletins have multiple, incongruent elements like a stock ticker, sports scores, advertisement and headlines unrelated to the main topic – resulting in information overload.

Bulletins of some news channels cover the entire bottom half of the screen making the visual looks more chaotic. With an increasingly complicated chaotic visual experience, bulletins must decide how much it wants to reflect a computer screen. Putting more visuals, more text & lines & boxes and graphics and, sometimes, in assorted colours, reduce the focus and attention level.

Do packed screens impede...?

Screen clutter can be extremely eye catching, especially for the viewer who surfs between several channels. However, psychological research in US suggests that packed screens can impede comprehension. For people who are looking for quick information like stock quotes or weather update a certain amount of clutter is comprehendible. But, if a viewer is trying to listen to a reporter describing a complicated series of events, it's very difficult to absorb that information with too great a visual onslaught.

Researchers know that when words appear on screen most people read them. The "fixed" time and temperature bits may be easy to ignore, but that doesn't hold true for story slugs, name ID's, advertising plates and local headlines that change throughout the newscast. Each new line of text is a potential distraction, pulling the viewer's attention away from the substance of the newscast.

That's not the only reason graphics overload is so pernicious. A lot of graphics now in use are fundamentally misleading. Take the "breaking news" label, channels regularly slap on just about any story you can name. It may seem like a little thing - calling something breaking news when it's several hours old - but it's part of a detrimental pattern in many local newsrooms. Breaking News update/Just In/ News Flash/ Exclusive, etc on screen is more likely to erode credibility of news bulletins, irrespective or notwithstanding the view on the spot. Such "alerts" are not adding as is being presumed. In fact, some viewers feel "breaking news" is causing decline in the relevance of news bulletins. In any case such "distractions" are affecting "knowing" aspect of bulletins.

Telling viewers a story can be seen "Only on their Channel" when half the sound bites come from a news conference every other channel also covered. Touting a story as "News at 11" when there's not a single new development to report, not even a frame of fresh video. Most news channels have hourly bulletin or more than a couple of news bulletins daily. Some bulletins, with titles like "9 PM News", "Metro News", etc. But there is no experimentation evident with any of these bulletins to try out different ways of "loading the screen".

Is qualitative research missing?

Obviously, more understanding and research is required to assess how often various viewer profiles fixate on the written graphics, visuals, anchor/reporter's voice or advertisement. In this way, a channel can quantify the success of a given news bulletin in terms of actual attention and comprehension. For example, what percent of viewers read bottom lines – either the fixed ones or the moving lines? Which part of the news bulletin screen can be recalled? What is the extent of wooing (floating viewers) can be attributed to the various elements or graphics on the screen? Between seeing, hearing or reading, which one attracts more viewers and also indulge their interests?

Television News seems to have broken the myth that "seeing is no longer believing" - not always anyway, depending on the screen clutter. In fact, CMS research a few years ago indicated that seeing news on screen is not necessarily more believed as was traditionally understood. In fact, this analysis on clutter in news bulletins of news channels is part of a larger project at CMS

to understand why, despite proliferation of news channels and news bulletins, no significant evidence is there of their impact, including in enhancing the very reach of TV.

There are hardly a couple of prominent channels which do not succumb to the temptation of scrolling and crowding its bulletins even with anything with Breaking News or commercials at any point of its news bulletins. They are not of 24-hour news channels mostly. Hyderabad based ETV is one such pioneer. Its bulletin had won CMS Academy News TV Award over three years. This bulletin is viewed for its clarity, quality, credibility as a comprehensive news and consistently. Despite proliferation of 24-hour news channels, Telugu viewers distinguish ETV bulletin.

CMS media lab

CMS Media Lab is a premiere media research and consulting organization. It is pioneer in media research with two decades of experience. CMS Media Lab analyses contents, tracks trends and studies media priorities and agenda setting function.

www.cmsmedialab.org

Transparency Studies

The Right to Information Act 2005 represents a historic breakthrough in recognising the citizen's democratic rights to monitor measures affecting the public good. Following adoption of the Act by the Parliament of India, the CMS has set up a Transparency Studies wing to document, examine and publicise the interrelation between governance and society in all its aspects. It facilitates dissemination of relevant material, confers with experts and field workers and networks with the media to promote implementation and awareness.

The functions of Transparency Studies include:

- Publishing and distribution by electronic mail of Transparency Review, a journal designed to publicise news, articles and documentation concerning developments in Right to Information and the overall interface between governance and society. Priority is given to right to education, especially of children; right to work; right to justice and associated human and social rights, especially at the grassroots.

- Operating Transparency Features to disseminate articles and information on the above.

- Linking with civil society groups to further common objectives like exposing corruption, monitoring elections, improving civic services.

- Arranging discussions on emerging issues and problems between specialists and media persons.

www.cmsindia.org/cmstransparency

In 2010, CMS completes 20 years. Over these years, CMS sustained itself as a national institution with different and distinct accomplishments. Its pioneering initiatives over the years are in several areas of development, opinion research, environment, corruption& transparency studies, social development, etc.

www.cmsindia.org

To commemorate 20 years of CMS, twenty national lectures by eminent personalities are being organizes in partnership with Nehru Memorial Museum and Library.

CMS Academy of Communication & Convergence Studies is a distinct school and only one to base on in-house research and exploratory laboratory work where scholars deal with emerging futures in trying to mould it and play in the process a pro-active role.

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