



A Critical Review of Indian Television News Scene

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Introduction

The decade of 1995-2005 has witnessed unprecedented growth and changes in the Indian media scene both qualitatively and quantitatively. The media went through structural changes as a result of paradigm shifts in the media operations as well as larger contextual push-pull factors in the socio-economic-political situation of the country. The proliferation has been within and across the mass media. There is no parallel in the world for this kind of dramatic spurt and change in the media scene. A significant structural change in television is of its thrust on news from primarily entertainment. Against one Indian television channel (Doordarshan) and one or two news bulletins on TV a day in the country about two decades ago, in December 2005 we have about 25 television news channels across the country with round the clock news and half hourly news bulletins. (excluding BBC and CNN).

Once we had one state-managed television channel (Doordarshan), we now have nearly 100 channels of all genres and languages in the country. Between 2003 and 2005 the number of channels, for example in New Delhi, has more than doubled, going up from 4 to 10. Also, while the news scene was earlier dominated by English language newspapers, Indian languages media are proliferating now. Of the 25 news channels, hardly a couple of them are of English medium. Then there are also news bulletins on some other channels twice or thrice a day. The national news scene in the case of television is dominated by Delhi-based news channels, mostly Hindi. With over 100 million TV-homes and well over 200 million viewers weekly, the potential of 24-hour news channels is mind boggling.

Emergence of Television as a news media

Because of round-the-clock news channels nationally and regionally across the country and their live coverage potential - television today in India has emerged as a primary source of news. Nevertheless, newspapers remain serious and even more credible source of news as tracking studies by CMS have shown. Interestingly, these studies have also brought about "appetizing effect" of news channels. That is, the one who watches news bulletins on TV is likely to read newspapers. The CMS studies have further brought out, contrary to the general feeling, that recent proliferation of news channels in the

last couple of years has helped newspapers consolidate and grow both vertically and horizontally. This trend in the growth of newspapers has also been corroborated in 2005 by the two national surveys (NRS and IRS). Some increase in the circulation of newspapers and viewership of channels is because of multiplicity, and not expansion in the reach. Now more people watch more channels or programmes and newspaper readers read more newspapers. Thus, the doubling of the news channels has not led to an increase in viewing time, nor has it led to any decline in the time spent for reading daily newspapers. On the other hand, the average daily duration of viewing news on TV has declined in metros. This trend is also indicated by the latest viewership surveys.

Competition among media (newspapers and televisions) and within each media (between various TV channels) has given boost to numbers, and has expanded the market. However, the same thing could not be said about the overall credibility of news media -- commensurate to their proliferation. Thanks to 24-hour news channels, credibility of newspapers has gone up even though marginally. TV news channels have not improved their credibility as one would have expected. This is, perhaps, because of their pre-occupation and priorities in the coverage and certain practices.

TV news channels have now emerged as a primary source for news and current affairs, without eroding the importance of newspapers. In the initial period, television news bulletins were guided more by newspapers, but of late the trend is becoming the other way around despite the formula of round-the-clock news channels. It is less likely to help them explore untapped opportunities of reaching those still out of the circuit. Together newspapers and news channels set the public agenda of politics, markets and policies for the government. The content of news media in many respects reflects the mood of the nation, concerns of policy makers, priorities of the government and, of course, pre-occupation of media themselves as well as the influence of markets.

News channels are concerned in their coverage about at least four parameters. Such concerns are expected to expand the scope of news coverage and viewership of

news bulletins much beyond the present scale and increase their credibility and proactiveness. The four parameters are: origin of news, concern as evident from subject matter of contents, magnitude of repeating certain news, and scope of coverage of news or features. To understand these trends over time CMS Media Lab tracks news media everyday to analyse their content and evaluate over all trends. In the case of TV news, news bulletins of major national channels are recorded everyday and the content is analysed by the analysts. The highlights that have been summed up are out of the CMS service. The news channels included are: Doordarshan, NDTV, Aaj Tak, Zee, Sahara, Star and 24x7.

Subject categories of news bulletins

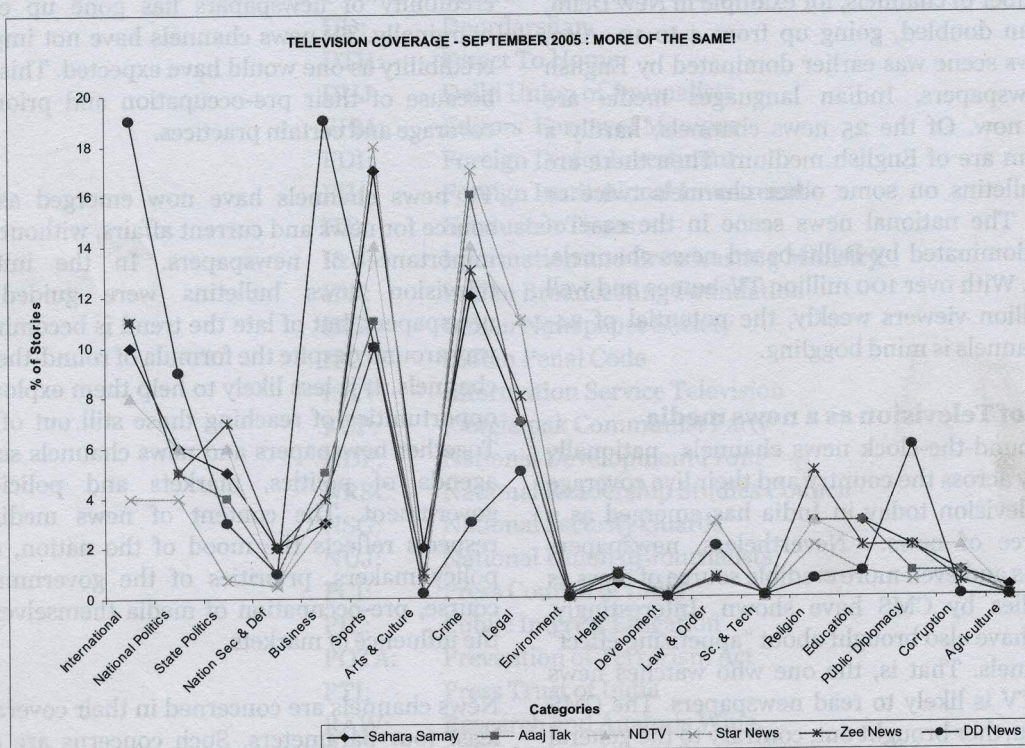
Five broader categories -- politics, sports, crime, law and order and international news -- account for nearly two-thirds of items of news bulletins of 24-hour news channels. In terms of priorities in coverage, the situation is complex and tending to get polarized between haves and have-nots. Coverage of rural India by news channels has been a casual affair, reflecting an urban bias. The range of issues covered by round-the-clock news bulletins is limited, which perhaps explains why the "penetration of TV", in general, and news channels, in particular, has remained nearly stagnant in the last one year. Despite proliferation of channels, their over all coverage of India has not expanded beyond what it was earlier in terms of news origination and focus.

Subject wise coverage by news channels (Sept 2005)

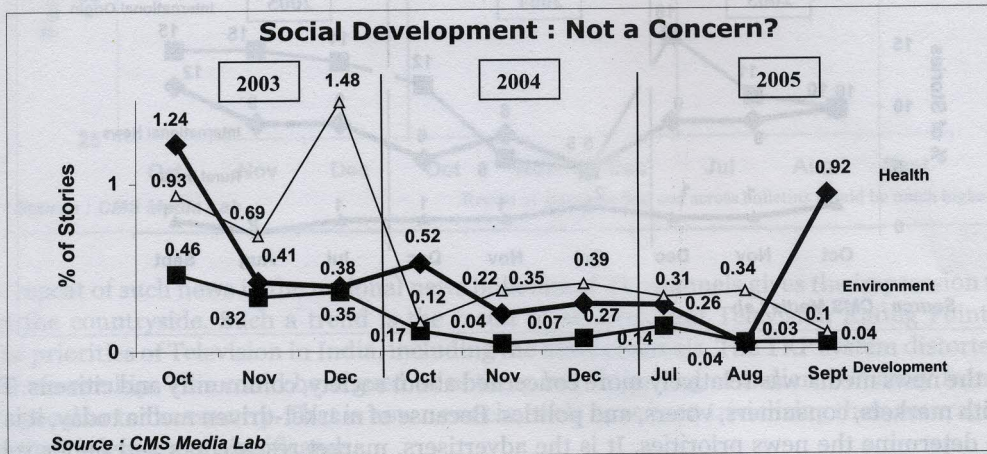
(Percentage of items)

	Sahara Samay	Aaj Tak	NDTV	Star News	Zee News	DD
News						
International	10	11	8	4	11	19
National Politics	6	5	6	4	5	9
State Politics	5	4	6	0.75	7	3
Business	3	5	4	3	4	19
Sports	17	11	14	18	10	10
Crime and						
Law & order	14	17	16	20	14	5

Source: CMS Media Lab

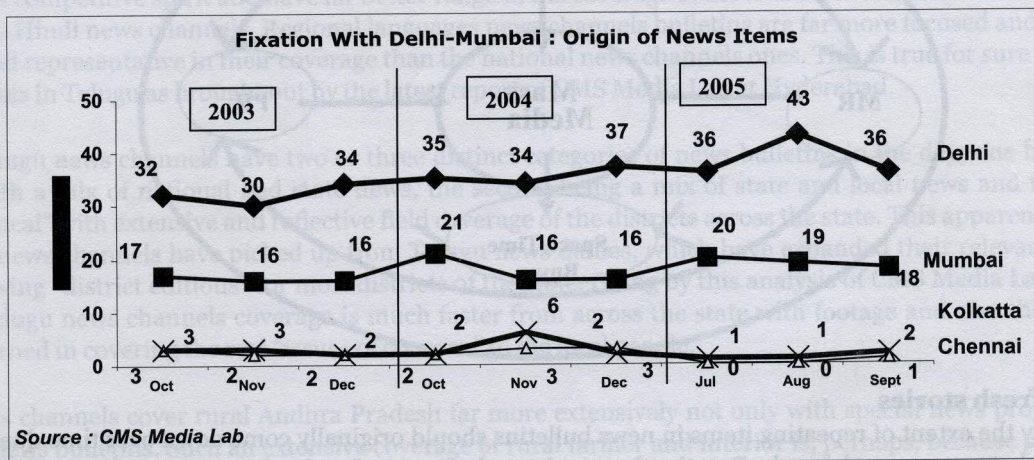


Hardly two per cent of national news bulletins is about health, education, development, welfare, environment, etc. One-third or more of the news items of national channels in 2005 continued to be on politicians and party politics. The preoccupation of the news with politics is greater than the newspapers. This trend is at the root of media's pampering of politicians and vice-a-versa. Such a trend is inconsistent with increasing awareness of the people. Of late, no wonder, the stature of news media being a "fourth estate" is being increasingly questioned. Similarity in the content of news media, both print and electronic, is too obvious, as if plurality and diversity of Indian democracy is too shallow.



Recently, there has been a decline of coverage of community issues and matters that concern rural people. The source of news is mostly political leaders or parties, government and corporates -- not from civil society. There is hardly any increase in the coverage of substantive issues crucial to a functional democracy. Regional languages channels, however, have saved the situation from getting worse. Their news bulletins are far more concerned with and far better dispersed within the state, as is indicated by the example of Telugu news channels.

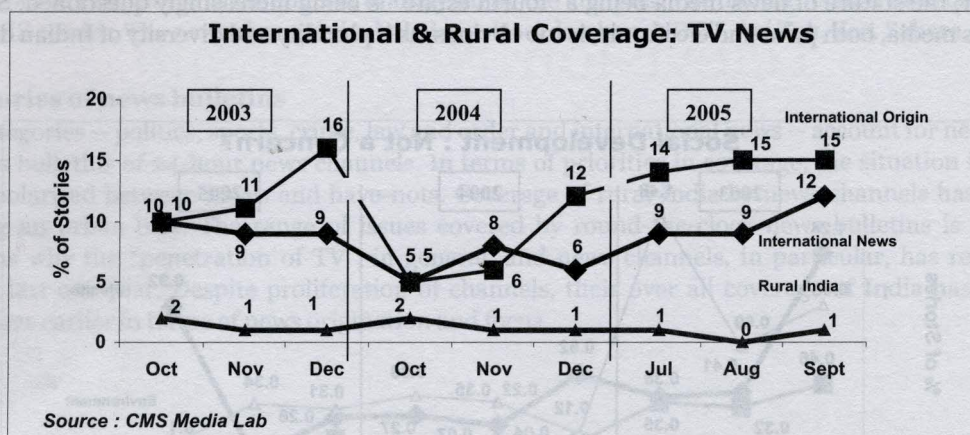
More than half of the news of TV news channels originate from the four metros. One-third of the stories are from Delhi, which is the base of these channels. Both the source and subject of news carry a heavy cosmopolitan bias.



International concerns

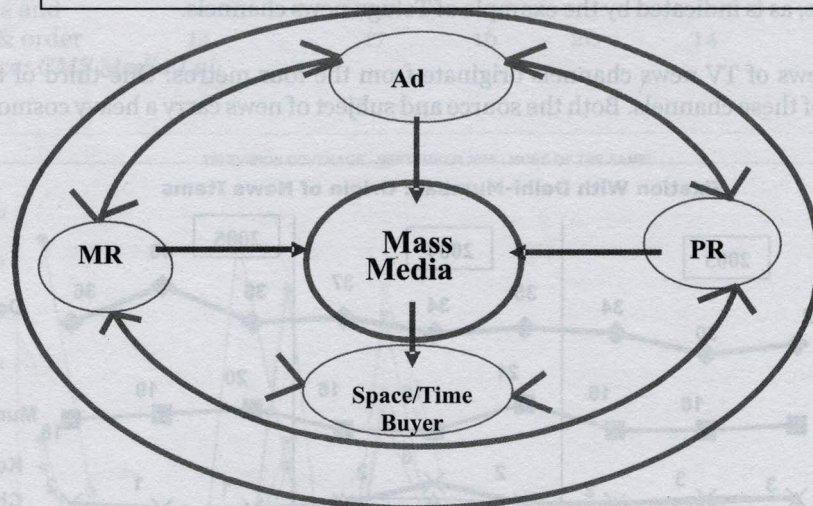
Three to four per cent of stories of news bulletins are about India but originate outside the country. About two-thirds of stories (15 per cent) originate from outside the country are "foreign news". Both these types of news have been on the increase since 2004. Visits of Heads of States do not receive similar coverage in the national news media. It reflects national policies on the coverage of, for example, the visit of prime ministers of China and Japan in April 2005. Though, Chinese prime minister's visit was short, it received twice or more coverage in the news bulletins than that of the Japanese prime minister.

Interestingly, international news in the last 30 months had never been below 5 per cent, but it went up as high as 16 per cent. The rural coverage in the bulletins was mostly around one per cent as if it was a fixed quota and as if nothing happened in rural India. Similarly, the coverage of the four metro cities is also almost uniform at above 55 per cent of total stories of bulletins.



Some years ago the news media was relatively more concerned about society, community and citizens. Today they are pre-occupied with markets, consumers, voters, and politics. Because of market-driven media today, it is no longer the journalists who determine the news priorities. It is the advertisers, market researchers and public relations people who determine the concerns and the content package of mass media. It is these forces, which have become the “new gatekeepers” of news media.

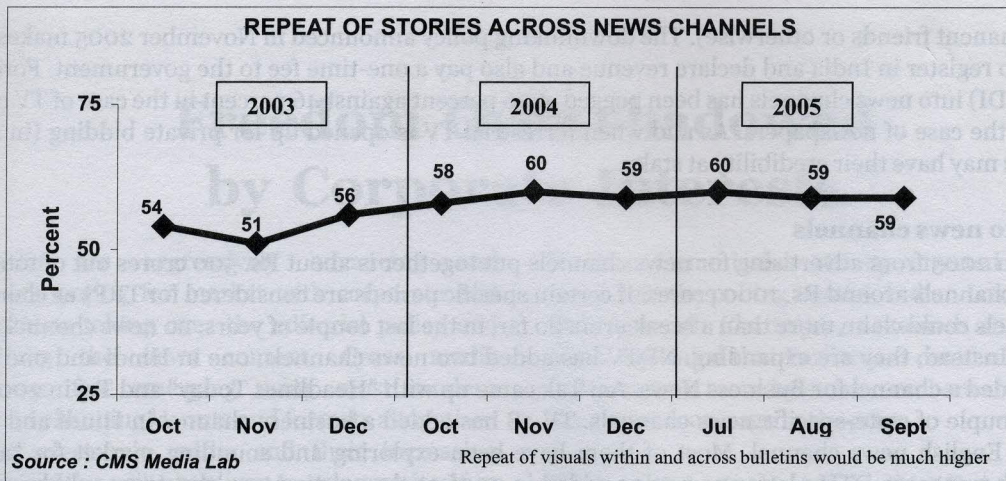
New Gatekeepers of News Media Content



Repeats / fresh stories

Theoretically the extent of repeating items in news bulletins should originally come down over time due to increased competition between news channels. But, that has not been the case so far. On the contrary, the share of actual news items of 24 hour news channels has been on the decline, with their extension to “other programmes” in an effort to expand viewership. As a result, hardly 12 hours of 24-hour news channels have news and hardly four out of them have “fresh news items of the day” not counting the extent of repeat of visuals in the same bulletin and of same story and “library” footage (with or without acknowledging).

And, then, bulletins are not with news alone; they also carry views. Hard news constitute hardly 90 minutes in a 24 hour news channel. Breaking news and the follow-up, however, distinguish the news channels.



Yet extensive repeat of such news in the national news bulletins of TV channels gives the impression that nothing else is happening in the countryside. Such a trend is the result of an irrelevant Television Rating Points (TRP) system, misleading the priorities of Television in India, including the news channels. The TRP system distorted the perception about the real viewership. This could be argued as nothing but “hijacking of Indian TV” away from challenges and opportunities peculiar to the country. That is how news channels have been trivializing their coverage of certain items much beyond their relevance or significance.

Media coverage of elections

However, if elections are meant for democracy-at-work, news channels have been at their best in upholding democratic process. Going by the extensive coverage, news media deserve praise for steering the poll campaigns in so many different ways from field based discussions to animated studio debates. Never before elections in India have been so transparent and live as in 2004 national polls.

Regional news channels: Case of Telugu

Regional news channels, unlike Hindi news channels, which position themselves as “national”, devote far more time for news in a competitive spirit and have far better range in the coverage of the items from far and near in the states as compared to Hindi news channels. Regional languages news channels bulletins are far more focused and yet far more reflective and representative in their coverage than the national news channels ones. This is true for sure in the case of news channels in Telugu as brought out by the latest report of CMS Media Lab at Hyderabad.

Further, Telugu news channels have two or three distinct categories of news bulletins in the day; one being a “news bulletin” with a mix of national and state news, the second being a mix of state and local news and the third one “primarily local” with extensive and reflective field coverage of the districts across the state. This apparently is a lesson the Telugu news channels have picked up from Telugu news dailies, which have expanded their relevance as well as reach by having “district editions” for most districts of the state. Going by this analysis of CMS Media Lab, it could be said that Telugu news channels coverage is much faster from across the state with footage and also they appear far more concerned in covering the real “issues of concern” to the local people.

Telugu news channels cover rural Andhra Pradesh far more extensively not only with special news programmes but also in the news bulletins. Such an extensive coverage of rural farmer and interior is, perhaps, because penetration of television sets in Andhra Pradesh is far greater than in the case of rural Hindi belt. A key finding of CMS Media Lab is that the opposition political party in the State, Telugu Desam Party (TDP), gets higher coverage in the news bulletins of Telugu news channels than the ruling Congress party. This comparative analysis of coverage of news channels shows that bulletins of Hindi news channels are TRP-driven than in the case of Telugu news bulletins. This analysis also brings out that news channels have better potential for more coverage and better reflection of grassroots realities.

Government policies

There are no specific new (or old) regulations that have been made in the wake of proliferation of news channels and private news channels, except what has been provided in the Cable TV Regulation Act of 1995-1997. Broad guidelines make no difference to actual operations. There should be no derogatory coverage of countries friendly to India (as if

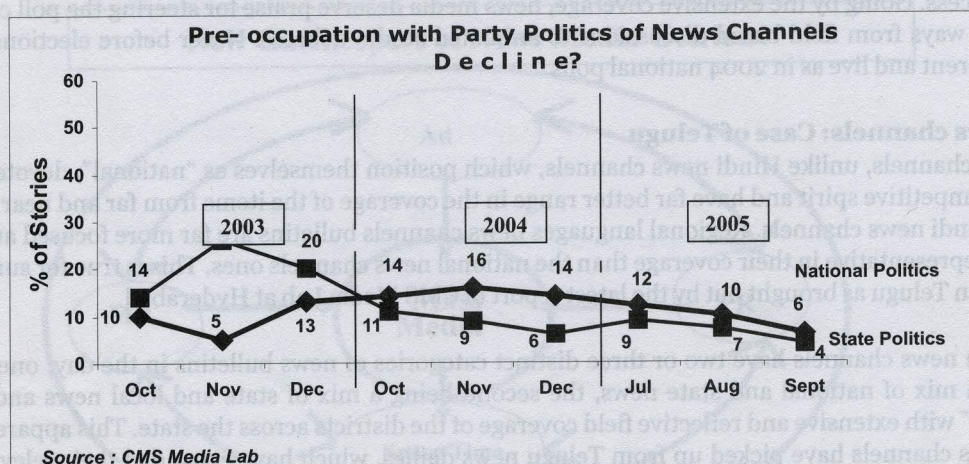
there are permanent friends or otherwise). The downlinking policy announced in November 2005 makes it obligatory for channels to register in India and declare revenue and also pay a one-time fee to the government. Foreign Director Investment (FDI) into news channels has been pegged at 26 percent against 46 percent in the case of TV channels, and 26 percent in the case of newspapers. As and when terrestrial TV is opened up for private bidding (in 2006), many news channels may have their credibility at stake.

Ad support to news channels

The revenue in 2005 from advertising for news channels put together is about Rs. 500 crores out of total advertising outlays of TV channels around Rs. 1000 crores. If certain specific periods are considered for TRPs as claimed, a couple of news channels could claim more than a break even. So far, in the last couple of years, no news channel has closed its news service. Instead, they are expanding. NDTV has added two news channels, one in Hindi and one for Business. Zee TV has added a channel for Business News. Aaj Tak came up with "Headlines Today" and Tej in 2005. Sahara TV has added a couple of state-specific news channels. TV-18 has added a business channel in Hindi and is coming up soon with an English news channel. Most of them have been exploring and sounding market for "add-on" news channels. With two more DTH platforms getting added in 2006 to the existing two, the year could be expected to be one of more news channels, irrespective of the extent of advertising support available. What qualitative change such a proliferation would bring in needs to be seen in 2006.

Trends over three years

Pre-occupation of channels with party politics has lead to certain decline in their share. But, contrary to expectations, such a decline has not led to any increase in the coverage of social development or other serious issues in the last two to three years, despite increased activities in these fields. Instead, the increase has come more in the coverage of lifestyle, amusement and human interest stories and, of course, financial and corporate reporting. Efforts among news channels have been to expand news channel and come out with one or other niche channel like business, health, sports, "views", etc.



Also, increased competition among news channels - is expected to increase news coverage from newer centers and far off places than before, but there is no evidence to that, apparently because coverage tends to be TRP oriented as if instant popularity is all that matters. Speed in the coverage of spot events, including accidents, controversies and the frequency of live coverage has increased even at the cost of criticism of "hyped" such events, situations and personalities.

Despite all the recent growth and expansion of mass media and emergence of new media, the overall reach is not even two-thirds of the adult population of the country. And, regional differences between states continue to be glaring. In the last couple of years, there has been some stagnation in the "overall expansion" of media. This is because of preoccupation of news media in terms of their concerns, content and concentration in their operations. They are all trying to reach the same people, the ones with deep pockets. The latest NRS brings out that the reach of newspapers has even fallen in urban India since 2002 and that there are 3.4 million people who can read, but do not read any publication. Despite proliferation of news media and competitiveness, the choice in the content package is not so attractive.

(Dr. N. Bhaskara Rao is a pioneer in media and public opinion research in India. He is also the founder Chairman of premier Centre for Media Studies (CMS))