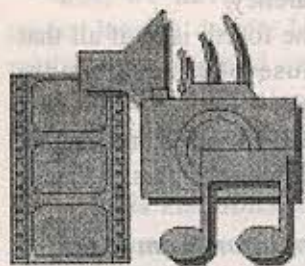


Insights from 2004 Mandate and the Media

N BHASKARA RAO



Despite all the expansion, proliferation and the boom in the media recently, the "power of media" seems to be far less today than it was two decades ago.

2004 polls had exposed news media, research agencies even more, and political parties further. In this regard, We may limit to five observations and suggest at the end some correctives.

1. The first is the disconnect of news media.

We always knew about divides in the country. The disconnect was not a concern. Senior Journalists like Nikhil Chakraborty did refer and write candidly about this phenomena a decade ago. More recently, in 1998 N S Jaganathan wrote about irrelevance of press in the context of elections. Between the divide and the disconnect are the deep pockets; That is how media priorities and popular wave length are at such variance.

Despite all that expansion, proliferation and the boom in the media recently, the "power of media" seems to be far less today than it was two decades ago. Even more the credibility. Studies have indicated that this is because of limited representative character and definite decline in the social responsibility/concerns of media.

So, the disconnect of media is not only on account of its limited reach, but, even more, its irrelevance.

(Journalist organizations themselves maintain that journalism

as a profession has declined despite increased profits of media enterprises. This shift in the paradigm needs to be understood in the larger context).

2. The second is blatant – bandwagoning tendency in the media;

This trend of bandwagoning in the media as we have seen in 2004 cannot be described as complacency; but it could be commerce and convenience. (We have first hand information from three States how editorial space/time was commercialized in 2004 with package rates).

In my book in 1968, "Politics of leadership in an Indian State", I described in one chapter, how news media tend to get rally around political parties - journalists by pooling their copy and newspaper managements by currying favours. What we witnessed a few months ago was a similar phenomena – but on a bigger scale. The difference is, there are more partners and players competing in this process now. That is how, we see in the media more of the same...

Media coverage of poll scene took a turn in the second half of 1960's in the wake of eclipse of Swatantra Party in the Lok Sabha poll preceded by an intense media pre-occupation in its favour. That

was when media was widely accused of blatant bias and gross disconnect with outside metropolitan India.

It was that realization that lead to a wave of expansion – mostly of regional newspapers. Also, it was that which lead to great editors of the day looking for alternate ways of covering election campaigns more objectively. That was how sample surveys had started to appear and caught on. Of course it was TV which opened up this window a decade later. In what way the realization in 2004 would make a difference?. We need to wait and see in the next couple of months/years.

3. The third is that 2004 elections have brought out the inadequacies of poll surveys and their misleading use by news media and also by political parties. This issue alone needs long write-up.

Earlier we were not sure of effects of poll surveys, but 2004 polls had brought out "double edged" character of poll surveys.

The kind of one-upmanship, in the name of competition, even among research agencies and psephologists in 2004 was unprecedented. It was as if they operate in tandem. No wonder, why there was no plausible explanation for the "mislead" from neither of the

agency after April 2004.

Methodologies used by research agencies, by and large remained same despite significant changes in politics of the country. Using past voting pattern as the basis for projecting seats/votes despite shifts in the very paradigm of politics is one reason for their failure. Going off the mark is nothing unusual in the case of pre-poll surveys. But, not so with exit polls, particularly as in 1998 and 1999. And yet, 2002 witnessed further debacle and by the same psephologists – as if we have not learnt.

Researchers' subjectivity about something they are not experts in, cannot be expected any better than the working journalists. Exit-polls implied increased weightage to the subjectivity element. That is how they further eroded the very credibility and exposed poll surveys. And then the craze for "larger" and "largest" ever sample size had ensured *faux pas* of exit polls. Yet, there was hardly any practice of having serious interaction between

editors/journalists and those who describe themselves as psephologists engaged in the number game before giving out.

Lack of sensitivity in the media about methodologies too has added to the "let down" by surveys and psephologists. Invitation to a two day "open house on pre-poll surveys" at our Research House, 3 – 4 weeks prior to the poll days in the last couple of Lok Sabha elections, hardly had any journalist to come by.

By now everyone knows that poll surveys have become a commercial proposition, a very lucrative one particularly for the one-man operations with no credentials and, in a couple of cases, no address. And yet their presence was prominent in the media. It has become a "free-for-all" affair.

Political parties, have been using and viewing surveys as part of their election strategies. That is how there were so many plants in the media in so many different ways.

As a result, there is ambiguity on all the four core aspects of psephological exercises: (1) Independence, (2) objectivity, (3) reflective or representativeness and (4) transparency.

4. The fourth is as if all that was because of a Jugalbandhi phenomena –

A week to week analysis of news media (newspapers and news

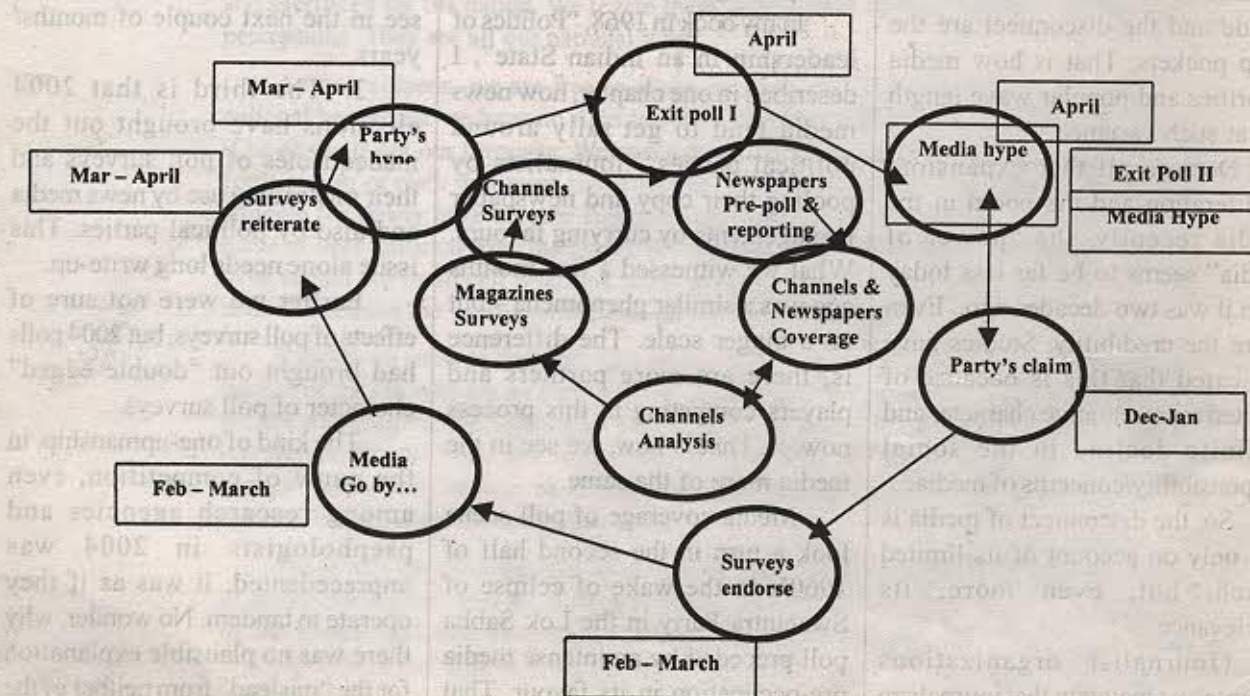
We have first hand information from three States how editorial space/time was commercialized in 2004 with package rates

channels) between January and end of April 2004 brings out certain gang up between key players as if it was a Jugalbandhi phenomena; MR+PR+AA+TV+ PRESS+.. and, of course, the political parties.

This phenomena in 2004 was too obvious. It worked like this starting January 2004.

5. The fifth observation is politicians pampering media and *vice versa* is a old factor with new name.

Despite never an incumbent



had come back to power on the power of media, our political parties do not seem to learn lessons. Fear of boomerang too does not seem to bother our leaders.

For, we have examples of parties loosing despite high pitch media coverage and campaign. And, in 2004 we also had an example of a party impressively

one – media, research agencies, parties and the EC. All of them need to think of correctives just to mention a few...

1. Media should go beyond – in terms of sources; personalities, concerns to do with polls,

2. Self discipline in the profession as Nikhil Chakraborty called for it exactly a decade ago.

Such a discipline and transparency is needed even more in the operations of psephologists and research

agencies – as I called in 1986.

3. The overall pre-occupation with politics and hyping at the cost of own credibility needs a larger debate.

4. Guidelines both for news media in using poll surveys, and for survey agencies in disclosing methodology and all findings.

5. Election Commission should be pro-active in the case of media's role for free & fair elections. And they should restrain exit polls and pre-poll surveys with disclosure of norms and conditions.

8. Let me sum up the overall communication scene in the larger context today in the country

*The more the media expand
The less we seem to understand
The more the information flow,
The less we really seem to know;
The more the message we send,
The less we seem to comprehend.
The more the message we're
screening,
The more the message lacks a
meaning;*

*Dr Rao is founder Chairman of
Centre for Media Studies (CMS),
New Delhi.*

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scoring without any coverage of its campaign in the news media.

6. That voters can neither be taken for granted or mislead by media – not every time and on all contexts.

7. Let me mention the correctives.

2004 poll has lessons for every

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