

On 'India's Changing Media Landscape'



What the media does without being bribed

On 22 May 2019 as the million plus electronic voting machines that register the popular will in India were being clustered for the count after a gruelling campaign and 38-day long schedule of polling, the *Columbia Journalism Review* posted an article rich with cross references, titled “Results expected in India’s ‘WhatsApp election’”.

Though a number of issues were at stake in the election, including matters of life and livelihood, what had been most riveting was “the rampant proliferation of disinformation and hate speech online”.

“Traditional media” with its significant presence in the public sphere could not evade responsibility, but the more serious aggravation by far, had been caused by the social media platform Facebook and its wholly owned messaging app WhatsApp.

Sevanti Ninan, in her thorough and rather depressing account of the “delegitimisation of the media as an institution” over the last five years, sees its “co-option by the ruling establishment” as the principal cause. The media has rolled over and played dead, rather than risk offending a powerful regime that had emerged in the general election of 2014, headed by the first prime minister to command an absolute parliamentary majority since 1984. The conduct of the media in this context strongly recalls the old ditty about the British journalist who could never be bribed, though with all he was willing to do “unbribed”, there really was no occasion to.

Ninan charts the changes in the media environment which have influenced this transformation of journalism into an active and eager servitor of power. There never was a golden age, only its distant promise, a glimmer that remained on the horizon till perhaps the early years of this century. The internet in its earlier avatar was seen, quite unlike the role it is cast in today, as a source of enrichment of journalism, opening up access to sources and allowing public participation that went beyond the ritualised routine of the letter to the editor.

Perhaps the opportunities were squandered. Perhaps the arrival of social media and its rapid mutation changed everything. From the time that Facebook made its debut on the world stage, enabling what has been described as a “miraculous” degree of connectivity, to its current status as a malign force enabling political extremism with a pronounced tilt towards the right, the world has come a long way. The alarms were sounded after a real-estate racketeer and crooked businessman won the US presidency in 2016. But the warnings were already evident from the 2014 general election in India.

In her valuable recent book Pamela Philipose describes how the BJP succeeded in India's "most mediated election" in 2014, in capturing the public space through a coordinated effort across all media platforms. This writer has written about how the Modi campaign in 2014 cast the internet, "not as a domain of vast possibilities, or of the deepening of democracy through the richness of user generated content". Social media rather, has become a new mode of propaganda: not pluralistic and interactive, but relentlessly one-way and single-themed.

How the BJP succeeded beyond all expectations is a question that can only be answered, perhaps, in the realm of mass psychology. If the inquiry were to be anchored within media studies, the answer may lie in unpacking that much used and little understood term, "convergence".

Philipose argues for an understanding of convergence that goes beyond technology, one which accounts for the cultural dimension. Technology enables the seamless flow of content across various media formats, but it cannot be viewed as an autonomous driver of the process. Agency rather, rests in the cultural domain, in what Manuel Castells calls the world of meanings that communicative subjects fashion in their interactions with each other. At critical political junctures, as with national general elections, the media fancies itself as an agenda setting agency but wedding this purpose to the profit imperative is often difficult. An easy route suggests itself. As Philipose writes, the media's agenda-setting conceits are most easily fulfilled when it works in conformity with what the audience is "already inclined to believe".

An inquiry is also called for into the agenda setting power of commerce. Advertising is the main driver of media profitability, and purchasing power is the single metric that matters to the advertiser. The media industry is challenged today by a shift in advertiser priorities. Print is seen to be less effective in terms of delivering value for ad money invested, though TV continues to retain its promise. The expanding new frontier is digital media and unsurprisingly a recent estimate of advertising spending in the Indian economy forecasts a rapid contraction of the print share as digital expands. TV may retain its share for a while, though for the clamouring mass of channels in existence claiming to be in the business of news this may not quite be sufficient.

Since the global financial meltdown of 2008, corporate advertising budgets have been under pressure and the competition among media outlets for the slowly growing pool of advertising money has been frenetic. Anxieties among the high purchasing power strata have grown at the same time over a possible loss of privilege from the pursuit of a rights-based policy idiom. A strongman able to revive jaded nationalistic tropes and sway crowds with a message of rage and resentment, promises distraction from a reasoned discourse.

Print and TV news have adopted various strategic manoeuvres to staunch the haemorrhage of advertising to digital platforms. An active promotion of hashtags that cater to the mood of the moment among the affluent strata could be one way of driving audience and potentially ad traffic to their sites. That these commercial strategems also constitute an inducement for the older media to emulate the "echo chamber" effects of the new, is a matter of deep worry for seasoned journalists and observers of the media.

As Ninan points out, Modi was categorical from very early in his first term in office that he had no use for the traditional media. His approach, which has been executed by a large cohort of eager acolytes, has been to create a media system that compels older outlets into the abject quest of emulation, in the hope of gaining some traction with the audiences that matter. This perhaps explains why large sections of the mainstream media see no way out of the crisis of profitability they are facing, other than mimicking the loud, obstreperous and intolerant tone that the regime seeks to foster through the social media.

Modi's second term is unlikely to be any different. Three days after gaining a victory in the general election even more decisive than forecast by the exit polls, Modi addressed the senior leadership and newly elected members of parliament of his party and its coalition partners. Alongside the call to duty and service, the main themes of his 75 minute speech in Hindi, Modi issued several explicit warnings

about the media. The signals were clear: the Prime Minister was not inclined in his second term to retreat from the contentious relationship he had maintained with the media through the first.

Modi's unique political success and his impact on the social and communal fabric, cannot be understood without reference to the use he and his core constituencies have made of the internet and the new media. There also is perhaps a strategic sensibility underlying this approach, a shrewd reading of how the structural transformations of the internet age have exposed fault-lines in traditional media which could be exploited for political advantage.

Given all the worries about the popular will being actively subverted by social media propaganda and activism, a study released 11 June by the Delhi-based Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) would have brought relief, if nothing else, for its anti-climactic findings. The large-scale survey carried out with Lokniti, the CSDS's affiliated study group on democratic practice, indicated that the social media influence though undeniable, was not of a magnitude that would overwhelm other factors..

The Lokniti study will be closely parsed in the months ahead. Yet certain inconsistencies with other research findings need to be highlighted for a deeper understanding. For instance, Lokniti finds that no more than 3% of respondents reported using social media for accessing news. This stands in stark contrast to the finding by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ) which published the results of its first survey in India a month before the vote count. The sample was very different from Lokniti's, in being limited to consumers of the English-language news media. The methodology too was different, in being entirely based on online questionnaires. Yet the findings are different by sufficient orders of magnitude to warrant some deep questioning of the Lokniti findings.

The RISJ study finds that India is a "platform-dominated market", where an "overwhelming majority of respondents identify various forms of distributed discovery as their main way of accessing news online". The number that seeks direct access to traditional news outlets is a small and diminishing minority. Most news consumers use search and various kinds of social media to access their news for the day.

More than most other markets, including developing countries, the cellphone is king in India. No fewer than 68% of respondents in the RISJ study identified "smart" phones as their main source for accessing news; and no fewer than 31% had no source other than the mobile phone.

Lokniti's finding that social media have not grown very significantly in terms of usage numbers is based upon the recollections of survey respondents about hours spent on any given platform over a relevant period of time. Yet this finding is difficult to square with information available from the standard industry source, the Ericsson Mobility Report (EMR) on the volumes of data transacted over the mobile phone network. These have, unsurprisingly, multiplied several times since 2015 on the eve of when India's biggest industrial conglomerate Reliance – with political clout unmatched in business history -- entered the market with a subsidiary operation, Jio, that offered virtually free data plans. As with the growing Reliance presence in a number of sectors, its entry into telecom has been facilitated enormously by indulgent policy, which treats the corporation as virtually an extension of the government.

EMR clubs India along with Nepal and Bhutan as a market, but the numbers could safely be assumed to pertain mostly to India. In its most recent edition, the EMR speaks of an average data traffic of 9.8 gigabytes (GB) per month over each smart-phone in the India region in the last quarter of 2018. This was sharply up over the earlier year's figure of 6 GB per month. Going back to 2015, the data traffic on each smart-phone was a mere 1.5 GB per month.

Factoring in the rapid growth in smart-phone numbers, the total data traffic over the mobile network has increased from 0.3 Exabytes per month in 2015 (each Exabyte is a billion Gigabytes) to 4.6 in 2018.

These figures are obviously very difficult to reconcile with the Lokniti finding that news access over social media is a rarity. The problem may lie in how news is defined. The RISJ finds that most news

today is consumed in the video format. An ethnographic survey of fake news in India, released last November by the BBC, spoke of memes and images as a fast growing formats for the exchange of news and the formation of collective solidarities. This study, which involved voluntary access to the cellphone messaging services of a number of active social media participants, revealed that “nationalism” was a major driver of fake news. Among participants in the survey, “facts were less important to some than the emotional desire to bolster national identity”. The personal was political in the realm of the social media. In empowering users to vent their anxieties in the confident belief that these would gain resonance with others similarly inclined, social media had empowered citizens in a perverse fashion. And analysis “suggested that right-wing networks (were) much more organised than on the left, pushing nationalistic fake stories further”.

The right-wing has understood that reality to create a corrosive populism that actively pursues the disenfranchisement of those at the margins. Media practitioners committed to values of liberalism are yet to discover an antidote for this growing malaise.

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