



Role of the Press in a Democracy: India Votes for Newspapers, Only Just

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ABSTRACT

The May 2014 parliamentary election in India is considered a turning point in the history of democracy in the country. Not only did a political party get a majority for the first time since 1984 but it rode to this victory on the back of an unprecedented support from the mainstream media. The role of the media and in particular the press in a democracy has been the topic of many a debate and research. The backdrop of elections provides a fertile ground to once again study the role played by the media, its impact and implications in a democratic polity. As more percentage of the electorate is young- below the age of 35- the question of adequacy of political communication in the midst of varied media choice in the form of traditional newspaper to television and all forms of digital media needs to be understood. The 24 hour news channels bombard us with breaking news, twitter on the other hand is always a minute faster in giving the latest. Newspapers have traditionally served the role of political commentator informing and educating the masses on the political landscape that is India. Has this role been replaced by television and or new media or are the newspapers still relevant to the present generation for serving their ever increasing need for political news and views? This paper tries to search for answer to question about the role played by press in serving Indian democracy, especially from the point of the young Indian voter.

KEYWORDS : Press, Democracy, political communication, online media, youth

Introduction

India has the unique distinction of being the biggest democracy in the world. One of the major features of this democracy has been the regularity of elections and the change in the government reflecting the mood of the electorate. All elections have been free and fair, thanks to the elaborate preparations undertaken by the Election Commission of India. The introduction of Electronic Voting Machines instead of ballots and the mandatory issuance of Election ID cards has more or less made booth capturing, intimidation and bogus voting a thing of the past. In all this the role of the press should not be forgotten.

Indian press has a two hundred year history of fearless and independent existence outside the government control. From its role in the freedom struggle to investigating the rot in the Indian socio-political system, the press has kept the rulers on their toes. Not a day goes by without the press shining a torch on the corruption in the political arena and generating public opinion for change. Many of the scandals like BoforsGun kickback to 2G Spectrum discretionary allocation were brought to the surface by the press and governments were made to pay a heavy price.

Press is considered as the fourth estate and watchdog of the government. This political role that the press has to play is due to the belief that even democratically elected governments have a tendency to become dictatorial and govern against the wishes of the people. It is only because of the free press that people have a way of controlling and directing the government they elected in the first place. A government of the people, by the people and for the people can only be realized if the press functions as an adversary of the government in power. Government owned or controlled press is an anathema to democracy.

People in a democracy need a full and objective assessment of the political scene in the country. The press in the form of newspaper, magazine, news channels and now online publications has been serving the needs of an ever increasing and demanding electorate. It is not only the medium that one trusts but a medium that provides full functional requirement of a voter who has the most important decision, of whom to vote. If the press is not objective, fair, complete and balanced in its coverage then the voting decision will lack the necessary input vital for this decision making.

From Thomas Jefferson, third president of United States who said: "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter," to India's first prime minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru who is quoted as having said: "I would rather have a completely free Press with all the dangers involved in the wrong use of that freedom than a suppressed or regulated Press,"

all democratic leaders have supported the concept of a free press in the context of a democracy.

Voltaire in 1733 stated, "The man of taste will read only what is good; but the statesman will permit both bad and good." The historic link between democracy and press has time and again been reiterated by free thinking people. Press exists in all countries but its importance and the need to be free is more vital in a democracy. Western democracies have prided on a free and independent press to maintain the tradition of democracy- a knowledgeable electorate capable of deciding their future through the ballot box.

Review of Literature

A free press plays a vital role in democratic societies, enabling the open exchange of information and opinions among ordinary citizens, businesses, citizen associations, political parties, and governments (Koenig, 2013). Free and open media systems give voice to citizens, truth test candidates and political parties during elections, inform policy debates in legislatures, investigate corruption, hold public officials accountable, enable democratic governance and facilitate more effective development.

There are at least two major roles of the media in a democratic society (Krimsky, 2013). First, the media needs to give people the information that they need in order to make informed decisions about issues of the day. Second, the media needs to act as a "watchdog" to ensure that government officials and agencies are acting in proper ways. By doing these sorts of things, the media helps the people have the information they need to rule themselves.

Increasingly in America social media is taking over the role of providing citizens with political and civic engagement opportunities (Lee Rainie, 2012). Some 60% of American adults use either social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter and a new survey by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project finds that 66% of those social media users—or 39% of all American adults—have done at least one of eight civic or political activities with social media.

A vibrant democracy requires a free and independent press and a free press ensures a vibrant democracy. Freedom of the press and freedom of information are the cornerstones of any democracy (Is Democracy possible without an Independent Media?, 1992). Namibia, in particular, and Namibians themselves, who only two years ago emerged from the dark days of colonialism, are only now learning to bury their fears and become conscious of their newfound rights. They would be the losers if the independent press were to die. "the establishment, maintenance, and fostering of an independent, pluralistic and free press, is essential to the development and maintenance of democracy in a nation, and for economic development."

Jürgen Habermas while deliberating on the role media plays in the creation and maintenance of public sphere, which is vital for the working of a democracy, rues the lack of legitimacy of mass media in mediating political communication (Habermas, 2006). Mediated political communication can facilitate deliberative legitimate process in complex societies only if self-regulating media system gains independence from its social environments and of the anonymous audiences grant a feedback between an informal elite discourse and a responsive civil society.

Habermas refers to “the sociology of mass communication [which] conveys a skeptical impression of the power-ridden, mass-media-dominated public spheres of Western democracies” (Habermas 1996: 373). Similarly, later he sees danger presented by the power of the mass media: “Reporting facts as human interest stories, mixing information with entertainment, arranging material episodically, and breaking down complex relationships into smaller fragments—all of this comes together to form a syndrome that works to depoliticize public communication” (377).

There is an irony in that most Americans depend on the electronic media for political communication and at the same time there is a general distrust of politics and cynical attitude towards politicians as a consequence (Lee, 2005). The personalization of politics is bolstered by the commodification of programmes which in turn has led to candidate based voting as opposed to issue based.

There is a direct relationship between the importance given to political communication by the media and the citizen's involvement in political and civic life (Carpini, 2004). The more serious the political issues are dealt with by the mainstream media, the more involvement due to authentic information in the political sphere by the common man.

Sifting through the details of the ten chapters, the editors find no support for the sweeping generalizations of a global “media logic” and, except for the dominance of television, no general patterns of political media influence (Stevenson, 2001). They do conclude that information monopoly policies of totalitarian governments failed, and that media hastened the collapse of authoritarian systems. If anything distinguishes other democracies from the United States, it is a stronger public-service broadcast system and a political culture that emphasizes civic responsibility.

Methodology

A non-random survey among the young voters of Bangalore city comprising of a sample of 490 was undertaken and administered a questionnaire that had been validated first by a series of expert interviews with senior journalists and then a pilot study on 50 youngsters.

Five journalists from *The Hindu*, *Deccan Herald*, *CNN-IBN*, *Times Now* and *The Times of India* were interviewed to solicit their views on the role of news media in a democracy. The following research questions guided the study:

1. Which medium is preferred by young voters of India for political news?
2. Which medium of news do the young trust for their requirement of political communication?
3. Is political information given by the news media important for a vibrant democracy like India?
4. Do the media fulfill their role to serve the political system?
5. Which medium does the job best and why?
6. What are the implications of this reliance on a particular medium for political news and views?

Findings and Analysis

A more or less equal number of male (47%) and female (53%) respondents in the age group of 18-35 took the survey. Most (62%) were college graduates and a few (5%) were high school graduates.

Majority (80%) of the respondents was students and the rest (20%) were employed.

It is seen that the young Indian voter get their news from a variety of mediums. Newspapers and online news sources are preferred, but television news channels are also important. One can see that digital media is closing the gap and will in a few years' time become the most preferred source for news among the young.

People seem to prefer reading news about society in general and politics in particular. Even entertainment news is very important for the young readers. Surprisingly sports and business news is read by only a small number due to the need for special interest and knowledge.

Newspaper (35%) barely is ahead of new media (33%) when it comes to preference for accessing political news and views. Television (31.5%) is also an important medium while radio (0.5%) is negligible among the urban young, which is not surprising as FM radio is still prohibited from giving news.

The young need a comprehensive coverage of political stories, which is accurate and reliable and provides varied opinions on the same issue. It also should be well presented. Newspaper has an edge over other mediums but again online digital sources are fast replacing traditional newspapers. Majority are happy with the kind of coverage that their sources of news for politics afford.

A news source should provide expert views and insightful editorials as a way of making the issues understandable to the masses. In addition the people are looking for an in-depth analysis and not superfluous debates that deluge the news channels. And, of course, news has to be objective and balanced to have credibility. All these features are present in newspapers and increasingly going online too.

Majority feel that the press is doing its duty in furthering democracy in the country. This reflects in different forms from the point of view of the respondents. Some feel that the image of politics is associated with corruption to a large extent and therefore majority feel distanced from it. There is also a feeling of politics being immature, especially when one reads embarrassing details of politicians. Others feel that press coverage gives the feel of Indian democracy being vibrant and pluralistic.

A vast majority want the press to simplify the complexity that is politics in this country. The act of politicians needs to be explained and contextualized, instead of just focusing on the details. We know that a simple action of a political party is usually accompanied by a complex set of reasons. The lay person needs to understand the issue in its entirety to be able to take the right decisions.

Conclusion

As of 2015, newspapers are still considered important for the young for political and civic issues. They find the in-depth analysis of newspapers and magazines more credible and relevant for taking important decisions in their political life. But at the same time time is running out for newspapers if they don't get their act together. Gone are the days when newspapers like the Indian Express shook the political establishment and provided fodder for the middleclass urban Indian when it came to political action. Today, hardly any newspaper takes on the political class and questions their motives and exposes their corrupt practices. Advertising revenues and the increasing dependency on that for staying afloat has made newspapers and magazines subservient to the corporate-political class. Internet and online publications in particular have a chance at taking away the young readers with credible and independent commentary on political affairs.

Trust is built over time and depends on the audience perception of independence and objective coverage of political news. As there are many influences that a media outlet has to endure in order to bring a credible output in the form of a newspaper, the readers tend to believe traditional news organizations over new ones. It is not that only *The Hindu* is found to be credible, newspapers like *The Times of India* and *Deccan Herald* also have high credibility among the readers in the age group 18-35. What is eroding the credibility of newspapers in general is the perception that newspapers give importance to trivia over substance- like the Shashi Tharoor episodes from 'cattle class'.

comment to his role in the death of his wife SunandaPushkar. Instead newspapers are advised to pull up their socks and take a neutral view on politics and stay away from both reporting murky personal life and secondly giving credence to rumours and gossip.

To what extent is the information on politics in newspapers useful to the youth in taking important decisions? The fact that youth are active in political sphere is taken for granted. The immense mobilization of the young Indians, especially the urban middle-class, during the 'India Against Corruption (IAC) agitation showed the interest of this population in the well-being of democracy. Newspapers satisfied the young India's appetite for civic and political news and comments. The 2014 April-May Lok Sabha elections saw all forms of media being used by political parties to reach out to the young. Media coverage and analysis reached a saturation level with other news almost disappearing from the imagination of Indians. It is not so much the information but the authenticity that was the question. It is not just voting that provides us with a feature of Indian democracy but the decision to vote for a political party/candidate after a thorough analysis is the hall mark of a mature democracy. Newspapers made this possible by giving adequate, varied and to a large extent unbiased news and views to the readers.

In this way the media and again the emphasis is on print media came out as clear choice among the young for their political communication. Television being an audio-visual medium scored high on decibel but when it came to credibility and depth, it was the newspapers that came out the winners. Each medium has its advantage and they should understand and accept this reality. A newspaper cannot compete with Television and therefore must do what is best- analytical reporting. Television can be loud and in the process get you to concentrate on certain issues. Newspapers can then take it forward as many would not be satisfied with the superfluous nature of television reporting and analysis. Much of the substance in a live debate, for example, is lost in the noise of the arguments. Clearly newspapers have a niche that gives them breathing space in their quest to survive as a medium. If they sincerely serve the political needs of the ever demanding young population of the country then survival will be ensured.

Thus, newspapers have a historical record of having ushered in the alternative political system democracy. Press and democracy have grown and this synthesis and symbiotic relationship has endure nearly five hundred years. In the Indian context, after two centuries newspapers still rule the roost when it comes to political communication. No other media that has come in the last century has been able to uproot the entrenched media of print in the area of political sphere. In the West the end of newspapers has seen a gradual migration of the readers to online publications. The written word is still considered to be factual and powerful. India may not see the end of newspapers for a few decades more but slowly the political debates and forums will shift to online spaces. Newspapers can sit back and perish or take an active role and bring about that transition on their own accord.

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