

## **Quality vs Quantity: Proliferation of Private News Channels in India**

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Globalization, as a concept made the earth very small, and information technology has made the global village still smaller. Adoption of the process of globalization by the Indian government in theory and practice in the 1990s had a tremendous and unforeseen effect on the lifestyle of Indian people, and there was a sea change in basics of Indian systems by the adoption of the concepts of the liberalization and privatization. To accommodate such big transformation, the structural adjustment was badly essential, and a responsive mindset was to be created to accept the process of change, which was often criticized as mistaken modernity. Here comes the big role of the media to create that necessary mind set for the smooth functioning of the process and consequence of globalization.

The Union government launched a series of economic and social reforms in 1991 under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao. The new policies the government allowed private and foreign broadcasters to engage in limited operations in India. Foreign channels like CNN, Star TV, and domestic channels such as Zee TV and Sun TV started satellite broadcasts. Starting with 41 sets in 1962 and one channel, by 1991 TV in India covering more than 70 million homes giving a viewing population of more than 400 million individuals through more than 100 channels. In 1992, the government liberated its markets, opening them up to cable television. Five new channels belonging to the Hong Kong-based STAR TV gave Indians a fresh breath of life. MTV, STAR Plus, Star Movies, BBC, Prime Sports, and STAR Chinese Channel. Zee TV was the first private owned Indian channel to broadcast over cable.

As of 31 March 2019, there are over 908 Satellite television channels owned by 350 companies are broadcast in India<sup>1</sup>. This includes channels from the state-owned Doordarshan, News Corporation-owned STAR TV; Sony owned Sony Entertainment Television, Sun Network, and Zee TV. Other than English and Hindi channels, there was growth in the regional media on television too. Sun TV (India) was launched in 1992 as the first private channel in South India. The advent of satellite television in the 1990s is a landmark in the history of television broadcasting in this country as it changed the television landscape. Indian television suddenly became much for entertainment-driven (Sinha, 1998). The cable TV industry exploded in the early 1990s when the broadcast industry was liberalized and saw the entry of many foreign players like Rupert Murdoch's Star TV Network in 1991, MTV, and others.

Further, in a reflection of India's growing diaspora, Indian channels have also been aggressively increasing their presence across international markets. Television in India is a huge industry and has thousands of programs in all the states of India. Approximately half of all Indian households own a television. As per the FICCI Report 2013, there are 730 million TV Viewers in India and 800+ TV channels.

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To give one example, in February 1995 the New Delhi Television (NDTV) had started a daily half-hour show for Doordarshan. Until then, Prannoy Roy, the pioneer of private news television in the country, had been associated with *The World This Week*, a once-a-week global current affairs show that kept audiences hooked at a time when they had no other matching visual experience. The daily show was titled rather prosaically “*News Tonight*.” After an objection by the government, the word ‘*News*’ removed from the show; and thus was born India’s first private daily news broadcast, *Tonight*. A few months later, the TV Today Group began a Hindi daily news show, *Aaj Tak* and the rest is history.

The latest figures indicate that there are one hundred forty-six 24x7 licensed news channels in the country, with another dozen waiting in the queue for licenses. We have come a long way from the Doordarshan monopoly era when only ruling party politicians could be shown on the television. The proliferation of private news channels has been the biggest change in the last twenty-five years of news media (Sardesai, 2014). But has quantity come at the cost of quality?

### **Impact of Privatization**

Privatization has impacted the growth of the television industry both in terms of numbers of channels as well as the variety of programs. It has also led to the popularity of entertainment channels over news channels. There was a worldwide trend during the 1980s towards the commercialization of television. Herman and Mc Chesney (2001) argue that during this decade, the policies of deregulation and privatization were applied to national broadcasting and telecommunication systems that were traditionally regulated and often publicly owned and operated. This had a detrimental impact on public service programs which were replaced with more and more entertainment programming. The television industry is still struggling to produce quality content, and the main reasons for it are high carriage fees and low subscription revenue which limit the broadcasters ability to invest in quality content and the lack of good quality talent for the media industry (Vanita Kohli-Khandekar, 2010).

Television slowly became an industry that involved huge money. With the huge investment, the producers needed assurance of returns. As the economy opened, the Indian producers became aware of the cultural products abroad. These two phenomena combined, triggered several producers to copy programs. The copyright laws couldn’t keep pace with the rapid growth of Indian television. TV formats would fail to fall within the definitions of the law. How could one protect their original work was the rising question? (Singh: 2008). Intellectual property rights and specifically copyright laws were expected to provide a mechanism to protect such work. A lot of popular television formats such as ‘*Who Wants to be a Millionaire*’ licensed to the UK based Celador, was bought by Kaun Banega Crorepati [Star TV]. This was ‘*replicated*’ by *Sawal Dus Crore Ka* on Zee TV and further by *Koteeswaran* on Sun TV. These quiz and drama programs have raised various copyright issues which might become much graver in the future as these quiz and drama programs are also a major source of revenue for the television industry (Thomas: 2001).

A positive development was the availability of less biased news and current affairs programs than in the days of the Doordarshan monopoly. But the growth in the concentration of ownership and ownership of TV channels by political parties have also led to the creation of biased news and propaganda vehicle for the political parties

## **The Concept of Breaking News**

As we surf across channels, there is reason to believe that the concept of “breaking news” has broken down with every morsel of news being magnified into a story of national importance; that the notion of an “exclusive” has lost meaning with a Shah Rukh Khan interview, for example, during a film promotional playing across channels; that sensationalism has replaced sense to the point where you wonder whether an Indo-Pak border war will first begin inside a television studio; where chaos has replaced credibility with half a dozen voices often engaging in cross-talk for what passes off as “debate”; and where noise is seen to be a preferred option at times to good old-fashioned news (Sardesai, 2014). Not surprisingly, the less TV-friendly, but far more newsworthy areas such as health, education, environment, have lost out in the hierarchy of news on television.

Interestingly, one of the more far-reaching aspects of this news revolution has been reflected in our coverage of politics as exemplified in General Election 2014. It could be argued, not entirely unjustifiably, that this was the first election where the terms of the contest were set in the media, not on the maidan. It was almost as if the electoral battle was being fought on prime time on a television screen near you. Twenty years ago, the traditional large political rally was designed to create a “mahaul” in a specific constituency. Now, the power of live television ensures that the rally plays out in millions of homes across the country: the audience size goes well beyond the few thousands who have gathered in a dusty field (Sardesai, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

If international best practices are to be followed, cross-media restrictions should be put in place to prevent large groups from owning stakes across several media, such as print, newspapers, television, radio and the internet. In the US, restrictions place a limit on the market-share available to one entity, and that prevents newspaper/broadcast cross-ownership in the same market. In France and Canada, a “two out of three” law prevails, whereby companies can only own two of three of the following: terrestrial television services, radio services, and daily newspapers. In the UK, the ownership of both newspapers and radio stations, and both television channels and newspapers in the same area, is prohibited. Today’s information has opened the floodgates of knowledge and curiosity. This is being attributed to the vast television exposure. A majority of people lives in remote villages, cut off from, what is known as, modernity. Till late, they led a life submerges in age-old conservatism. But now they can see and appreciate what is going around, adding to their information gain”. The spreading out of television has made many scholars and researchers feeling concern about the effects of television, and several researches have been conducted. Research studies have pointed out that there are individual effects and societal or collective effects of Television and Media as a whole. Media may affect the aggressiveness of individuals, their attitudes or knowledge, the kind of products they buy, the way they vote, their aspirations and beliefs in themselves, or the way they use their time. On the other hand, at a collective or societal level, it can reshape a political system, sports, religion, the court system, the economy, or the general culture.

There has been a raging debate across the globe as to the role of the state in controlling the media. The advocates of free media aver that an independent media is a sine qua non for a sustainable democracy, the advocates of the state say that any institution with unbridled freedom will lead to the creation of a Frankenstein monster. While both

sides are right, there has to be a line drawn to distinguish between regulation and censorship. But the question is, can we draw such a line? With the advent of fake news and the repercussions it has, the state is not wrong in pushing for censorship where required, especially in cases of national security or “alleged” national security reasons. But, if once such powers are given to the government, can they be taken back? Also, on the other side, there has been an alarming rise of corruption in the media and some deliberate attempts to influence opinions at the behest of vested interests. Who, then should be the sentinel of free, fair, and independent media? The answer cannot be in the binary as all of us are stakeholders in it. Thus a combination of statutory and self-regulating bodies is the best way to protect the freedom of the content across all media, where India has made a start and has a long way to go.

In the early television age, there was the belief that as an access technology for viewers became more organized – with a consolidation of cable networks, and introduction to DTH and then digital platforms – a market would be created for high-quality, niche news channels. These channels would spend generously on editorial content and raise revenue through subscriptions. Some 15 years ago, however, the government decided to impose price caps on various types of channels. Incredibly, this task devolved on the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI). As per the TRAI tariff order of 2016, the price ceiling for a news channel is Rs 5 per month. In contrast, the price ceiling for a general entertainment channel is Rs 12 per month (Ashok Malik, 2017).

Consider what this means. In theory, the general entertainment channel could be re-running old soaps (cost of content: zero). The news channel would be required to constantly generate fresh content. Even so, the former is allowed to charge more than double what the latter can. Besides a general entertainment channel is always likely to get more subscribers. So it is a double hit for anybody seeking to build a serious news channel.

Over time news channel owners have simply given up and decided to take the route of reality TV. Today, with the sheer volume of free – occasionally dubious and sometimes outright fake – content available online, one wonders if the news business can ever be rescued in India.

The price cap trap has hurt more than just news. This explains why there is such little educational and knowledge-based programming and so few documentaries on television. Despite India’s rich heritage, a National Geographic type network, in any language, English or regional, is not feasible. Even general interest channels suffer from the problem. In the developed world – the so-called “mature media markets” – news and entertainment channels earn about 70% of revenue from the subscription. In India, only 36% comes from the subscription. The rest is sacrificed to the advertiser, the mad race for TRPs and the lowest common denominator. India has killed television by legislating the subscription model to death. This is leading to a serious lack of ambition and curbing of creative juices since recovering investments is impossible.

Ashok Malik of Observer Research Foundation in an article in the Hindustan Times (2017) has pointed out that “An episode of House of Cards costs the equivalent of Rs 30 crore to produce. In contrast, an episode of Big Boss costs a measly Rs 4 crore. Even accounting for the price differentials in the United States and India, that comparison is telling. The equivalent for news programming is as sharp. The time has come to think what is the solution to overcome this issue? Should the government, TRAI be pricing creativity and what a consumer should be paying for a quality news show – or should the market?

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