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Changing Paradigms In Indian TV News

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Abstract: Media has become huge, diverse, global, fast, commercial and very powerful. The media industry has witnessed a lot of changes in the last three decades. The element of timeliness has become very crucial. In the storm of 24-hour news content across the country, media houses are working on attractive, eye-catching and hard-hitting presentations and layout of the screen space. Keeping in mind Television Rating Points, every channel is engaged in polishing a news product and selling it in its own way. From Screen Layout “Rukavat ke Liye Khed Hai” to Big Breaking colourful, attractive and vibrant graphics with loud sound effects, upper band, lower band, ticker, aston band and news flash, everything has changed with the passage of time.

Key words: 24X7 News, TRP, Screen Layout

Introduction-In the fast-growing world, various forms of news media have become a part of modern life. Media has become huge, diverse, global, fast, commercial and very powerful. The media industry has witnessed a lot of changes in the last three decades. Now, people are a part of the global village where the media plays a crucial role in making them aware of the happenings around the world. The element of timeliness has become very crucial. A man who is a part of today's competitive world can't imagine his life without news. In the storm of 24-hour news content across the country, media houses are working on attractive, eye-catching and hard-hitting presentations and layout of the screen space. The most successful news channel is the one which is prepared to go LIVE with breaking news at the snap of a finger. With the introduction of new media technologies, such as smart phones and increasing penetration of the internet, the consumption of news on digital platforms continues to rise. These days, the content on TV channels can be watched over the smart phone and it can be used to cover the events also, replacing the professional video cameras. The concept of mobile journalism has been emerging as a new form of storytelling where journalists use portable devices to share their experiences and news.

Indian Television and News: The Background

Doordarshan paved the way for the golden age in Indian television with its introduction in 1959. Television was introduced in India as an experimental educational service. In India, the first experimental television service was started in 1959, in Delhi with an aim to produce and transmit social education programs under a project aided by UNESCO. “A UNESCO grant of \$20000 for the purchase of community receivers and a United States offer of some equipment proved much too tempting to resist, and on September 15, 1959, the Delhi Television Centre went on air”. (Kumar, 2010) Under this project, 20 sets were installed at various community centers in and around Delhi and 150-200 people viewed the programs at the each center. Bulky and expensive TV receivers were provided by the government for community viewing with programs relating to socio-economic development. Subsequently, 250 schools in Delhi joined the viewers. Special programs with having developmental and educational content were telecast on experimental basis on selected days of the week to cater to the needs of the large audiences.

Indian Television in 1960's

For generations Indians relied on radio for news, views and entertainment. The scene changed with the introduction of Television. The experiment became a service in 1965, when Doordarshan began beaming signals to reach television sets in living rooms in and around the country's capital. In the initial years, the development of the television broadcasting proceeded at a very slow pace. In 1965, the news in Hindi started with Pratima Puri reading out the first five-minute-long news bulletin. She also went on to interview Yuri Gagarin, the first man to travel into outer space. In early years Doordarshan, news was like radio news, with hardly any visuals. Until then, all the regular daily transmissions were operated by the All India Radio. For the years, AIR provided the content for TV that was illustrated with available visuals for daily telecasts. Doordarshan news readers with head bent down, did reading out the news, without a pause. The news telecasts used to be deadly dull with hardly any field reporting, quotes or interviews, or live action. A little later Perspective, a magazine program was started.

In an interview to Richa Anirudh in a program, "Zindgi Live", on IBN7 (posted on YouTube on June 1, 2013), Salma Sultan said that the journey with Doordarshan was quite interesting as at that time an aged and mature newsreader was essential. It was contended that maturity was a must for newsreader as it required credibility, which comes with age.

Television News in 1970's.

TV was confined to Delhi and its adjacent areas for several years, but the decade of 1970 saw a major expansion of television. In 1972, the television service was extended to Amritsar and Bombay followed by Srinagar, Lucknow, Madras and Calcutta. SITE was most ambitious program in history of Indian Television. This prepared a major ground for expansion of TV network across India. There was a sharp rise of number of TV sets. Till 1975, only seven Indian cities had the television service. But even then Doordarshan remained the sole provider of the programs and it continued to dominate the Indian television scene till early 1990s.

The SITE was a one-year pilot project in 1975-76, primarily undertaken to experiment with television through satellite communication to broadcast special programs in six states which included 2400 villages. (Aggarwal.V.B,Gupta V.S,2002)

Milestone in 1980's

On August 15, 1982, Doordarshan achieved a milestone by switching from black and white to color transmission just before the 9th Asian Games in Delhi. Doordarshan made full use of the electronic news gathering (ENG) and outdoor broadcasting vans. (Shrivastava, 1989). The audiences witnessed the LIVE color telecast of the Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi's speech on Independence Day. With switching to color transmission, it also shifted its emphasis from social-educational to commercial-entertainment programming. Same day, Doordarshan introduced a national telecast service from its own TV studio in National Capital, named DD1.

Revolutionary change in 1990's

With Doordarshan's monopoly over the airwaves, every ribbon cut by the IB minister made headline news. The content was presented in a very straight forward way without exaggerations. Field-based coverage got more professional over time, and the birth of satellite television in the early 1990s transformed the television experience.

In subsequent years, Doordarshan news coverage broke many barriers. Reporters were sent out to cover national and international developments. Viewers got familiarized with newsreaders and presenters, accepted them happily as members of the family and established long lasting bonds with them. Many faces seen on TV like Salma Sultan, Shammi Narang, Manjari Joshi, Avinash Kaur Sareen, Sarala Maheshwari, Shobna Jagdish and Ved Prakash acquired celebrity status with the passage of time. The news readers were like Bollywood stars. Sarla Maheshwari's sarees, sweetness in Meenu Joshi's voice and Shami Narang's base in the voice became very popular. Attraction for watching the news rather than reading or listening as well as, the popularity of newsreaders made people watch news. Doordarshan gave Salma Sultan an identity, but with the passage of time, she became the identity of Doordarshan.

The Economic Policy of 1991, which stressed on privatisation, globalisation, liberalisation and commercialization, gave a boost to television industry. The Indian television suddenly became much more entertainment- driven. A new television atmosphere was created by the satellite and cable technology as some other private television networks like STAR-TV, ZEE-TV, SONY, and MTV started broadcasting in India. The competition with channels forced Doordarshan to change its programming strategies in order to retain its dominant market share. (Singhal & Rogers, 2008)

To grant autonomy to Doordarshan and All India Radio, to promote national integration and to provide comprehensive broadcast coverage, the Prasar Bharti Bill was passed by the Parliament. But it was implemented in 1997.

Post 2000

24x7 news cycle came in with the advent of cable and satellite television and brought with it a much faster pace of news production and reporting, with instant updates. Television opened new horizons for viewers; sitting in living room, anyone could access information about what was happening. As a result, India's Public Service Broadcaster's News Doordarshan was forced to launch DD-News on November 03, 2003 by converting DD-Metro into a 24-hours news channel.

'The television news industry is highly competitive, and various television channels across Hindi, English and other languages comprise rivalry between existing competitors. The competition among these news channels is to acquire more viewers to pay attention to their channel and the industry is determined by intense rivalry for viewership. The "audience" of these news channels constitutes the power of buyers. However, along with viewers, advertisers have become one of the most significant forces as a buyer in the industry that affects the industry mechanism as well as content broadcasted. The revenue in the industry is generated through advertisements. However, the advertisements are dependent on the viewership of these news channels. As a result, a virtuous cycle of advertisers and viewers is created that drives the television industry'. (Kapoor, A & Bhambri A., 2022).

In 2023, The Board of Control for Cricket in India's Chief Selector Chetan Sharma had to resign from BCCI after a sting operation by ZEE Media. The Chief Selector's explosive remarks on various Indian senior players created a ruckus in Indian Cricket. Sharma alleged several players of taking injections to comeback to international cricket.

Media Trial was another issue which several TV channels were accused of. In the year 2020, the bollywood actor Sushant Rajput's suicide case, 24x7 Indian news channels grabbed that issue, with minute to minute update, digging into candid details of his personal life and tried to visualize the whole incident. Reporters were being covered from his flat in Mumbai where he died, from his native town and media channels tried to get reactions from government officials as well. Too much exaggeration and hype was given to that issue by putting other issues in the bin. Each channel tried to unleash new facts regarding that issue. Media Trial is a very serious issue which these channels have been involved in for past few years.

With 'Reportage on the Sushant Singh Rajput case, Indian TV news has hit a new low. Here is what should have happened — a prominent actor dies by suicide; the media covers his life and legacy; there is a conversation on mental health; there is due investigation; and there is closure. Instead, here is what has happened — a prominent actor dies by suicide; the media decides that it is not suicide but a product of either a deep-rooted conspiracy by an amorphous Bollywood power elite or an outright murder; conspiracy theories are peddled, reputations tarnished, and every norm of reportage is thrown into the bin; public opinion is manufactured; State agencies either willingly or due to this media-generated pressure enter the field; and citizens remain distracted.

This is not to suggest that a fair probe is not needed. But by acting as investigator, prosecutor, and judge, on flimsy grounds, TV news has been irresponsible. Today, they have found one target; tomorrow, it could be someone else.' (Hindustan Times, 2020)

Cut throat competition was another factor in which every channel wanted to be the first to break the news. Having same visuals, but with watermark of exclusive was another practice by news channels to make fool of viewers. Shaky mobile visuals could become a first headline of the bulletin and even a half an hour bulletin can be prepared on it by exaggerating it. Due to competition, almost all private news channels schedule their bulletin on air timing 3-4 minutes prior to others i.e. 10.56 am, 11.26 am to catch maximum

eyeballs. Most of the channels seem to be in a hurry to break the news, that they commence the bulletins with the headlines, instead of an anchor giving his/her introduction.

‘Television news died the day it stopped telling the stories of people. When it fell into the trap of a cheaper, studio-driven model, it became a twisted version of radio. Pictures became rarer and rarer, though this was meant to be a platform for visual storytelling. And once debates became the staple, they had to be jazzed up with the drama and dialectics of confrontation to make them more entertaining.’ (Dutt.B,2020)

‘The Delhi High Court’s humorous comment in Tharoor vs Goswami that “TV viewers who want to watch action films should (instead) watch TV debates on current affairs...” is more a cry of anguish. The nation wants to know when we they will have news without the noise and content and sans fiction.

The toxic triangle of viewership, ratings and revenue is the catalyst driving most debates and that paradigm must be continuously stigmatized along with use of a relentless societal scissor to cut this Gordian knot. The clear line between editorial and commercial decisions, and between news and entertainment, must be restored. (Sanghvi.V, Shergill.J,2020)

In case of elections results of five states including West Bengal on May 02, 2021, news channels started giving trends just after a few seconds of commencement of counting. How was it possible? Another surprising thing was that with a same source of getting trends, how there could be different trends on different news channels. Content was being presented in more than a dozen of windows, which viewers could hardly retain. Actually, the phenomenon had much to do with the business model of television in India. Every channel wanted their viewers to glue their eye balls with colorful catchy graphics. Similarly, in coverage of covid-19, news channels were trying to arrange various experts sitting far away in different countries so as to make an impact that their organization has global approach.

‘Uneven debates, deliberate interruptions, verbal blood sport, conscious invitation of biased and malicious participants, strategic muting of mikes, the formulation of one-sided themes and unevenly numbered viewpoints are standard tactics for driving TRP ratings and advertisement revenue. Serious news items are presented as popular crime thrillers and extremist anchors pose a potent threat to democracy. A set of reforms are now essential.’ (Sanghvi.V, Shergill.J,2020)

To conclude, the researcher would summarize the change in television news in following words:

Everything has to change with the time, and change is inevitable. From Screen Layout “Rukavat ke Liye Khed Hai” to Big Breaking colourful, attractive and vibrant graphics with loud sound effects, upper band, lower band, ticker, aston band and news flash, everything has changed with the passage of time. The channels do try to adopt all the tactics to catch their pray. In an attempt to be the first to break the news, the privacy and sensitivity of the content are also side lined. For the news channel, news became only a substance. Each channel is engaged in polishing a product and selling it in its own way. Every channel is concerned about TRP only. The purpose of journalism is to make citizens better informed so that they may take decisions about current topics that affect them, about their role in society and politics, and about how their chosen government as well as politicians are faring. Traditional media companies who have strong moral standards need to upgrade themselves as per the latest technological advancements. The new media houses need to reorient themselves with meaningful news coverage and responsible journalism. Latest technology is also highly demanding and journalists will have to keep abreast with the changing societal, as well as, technological norms. Right to privacy should be as important as right to freedom of information and both must be safeguarded by the news channels and media houses. Social media has restructured the way news is consumed by the viewers. But it can never replace responsible and sensible journalism. The role and relevance of good journalism will never die. It is rather the need of the hour to revive high standards of journalism in India. Even in the age of social media, television is still a very big medium which is watched by millions of people every day. Therefore, it is the duty of the people who are owning and running this medium to be more responsible towards the society and its needs.

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