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Where Infotainment Rules: TV News from India

Daya Thussu

International television news has changed profoundly in the past two decades, reflecting the cumulative impact of liberalization, privatization and deregulation of the media and communication sector, together with the digitization of content, enabling global and instantaneous circulation of television news across continents. While the imbalance in the flow of news – from the media-rich North (and within it a US-UK core) to the South – continues to define global television news, in an era of multi-vocal, multi-layered and multi-directional flows, the traditional domination of Western, or specifically American, media is diminishing, and, more importantly and arguably, being challenged (Nordenstreng and Thussu, 2015). In a complex, globalized world, international news is in the process of transformation, partly as a result of an increasingly mobile and globally networked and digitized communication infrastructure, leading to availability of news from such diverse countries as Russia, China, Iran and Qatar. In this chapter, I focus on how Indian television news is aiming to reach a global audience. With nearly 400 round-the-clock news channels and a strong tradition of English-language journalism, Indian perspectives on global affairs is accessible via such channels as News 18 India, part of the TV-18 group; Headlines Today, as well as NDTV 24x7, part of New Delhi Television Group, which has been operating for a quarter of a century, providing quality news. All three are private networks, while the Indian state broadcaster Doordarshan (DD) remains one of the few major state news networks not available on television screens in key markets at a time when global television news in English has expanded to include inputs from countries where English is not widely used, notably China's CCTV News and Russia's RT.

In an era of visually-driven global geo-politics, the importance of television news in a country's external communication strategy cannot be overemphasised. Unlike other established and emerging powers, Indian presence in international news arena is characterised by private not public broadcasters. This is ironic, given India's

traditional role in articulating Southern concerns in international forums – most notably during the 1970s NWICO (New World Information and Communication Order) debates within UNESCO and more recently its emergence as an economic and political power. After providing a historical context to the evolution of India's television news, this chapter will suggest that, with 400 round-the-clock news channels and a well-established English-language journalism - the vehicle for transnational communication and commerce – Indian journalists are well able to operate in a global media sphere: Indian-born or Indian-origin journalists are visible in leading international news outlets. However, while the all-news channels in India are just over a decade in existence, even in their early formative years their pro-business agenda was well formed. Are Indian television channels the voice of the global South or an echo of a US-dominated market-driven broadcasting culture, hostage to Bollywoodized infotainment?

The global news sphere has been dominated by what Jeremy Tunstall has called a 'US-UK news duopoly' – visible both in state-sponsored channels (such as the Voice of America and its associated global networks), and perhaps more effectively, private television news with their formidable economic muscle. The US government-sponsored news initiatives have been supported by a thriving and globalized private news media – from television news agencies (Reuters Television and APTN) to international news networks (CNN International, CNBC, to name the prominent ones). One reason for the US domination of global media is that the country has always followed a commercial model for its media industry – a venture in which the successive US governments have been a crucial factor. Broadcasting - both radio and television - had a commercial remit from its very inception. The commercially-driven trio of networks - CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System), NBC (National Broadcasting Corporation) and ABC (American Broadcasting Corporation) – provided both mass entertainment and public information. In the post-Cold War world the US-inspired commercial model of broadcasting has been globalized, creating a dynamic media, challenging state censorship and widening the public sphere, while at the same time also leading to the concentration of media power among private corporations (Thussu, 2016).

The exponential growth of multichannel networks has made the global media landscape multicultural, multilingual and multinational. Digital communication technologies in broadcasting and broadband have given viewers in many countries the ability to access simultaneously a vast array of local, national, regional, and international television in various genres. The last decade witnessed an exponential growth in the number of 24-hour news channels around the world (Rai and Cottle, 2010). Changing not only broadcasting ecology globally but affecting social and political sphere, real-time news has reinvented itself over the years and made a mark on the journalism industry. It has grown to influence the political decision-making and empower the social movements across the world (Cushion and Lewis, 2010).

Growth of News Television in India

As elsewhere in the world, the rapid liberalization, deregulation and privatization of media and cultural industries in India, coupled with the increasing availability of digital delivery and distribution mechanisms, has created a new market for 24/7 news. Television in India has grown exponentially in the past decade: from Doordarshan - a monotonous state monopoly until 1991 - to more than 800 channels, including more than 400 news and information networks, making it home to the world's most competitive news arena, catering to a huge, Indian audience, both domestic and diasporic (Jain, 2015). In the late 1990s and early 2000s India's news television sector saw an extraordinary increase in the number of dedicated news channels, most of which were national, but many international in reach, while some catered to the regional markets. Dedicated news networks now operate in a dozen of the 18 state-recognised languages, several of which have large geo-linguistic constituencies, both within the country and among the 25 million strong Indian diaspora (Kapur, 2010).

Such an extraordinary growth shows how much has changed since the introduction of television in India in 1959 as a means for disseminating government policies, public information and state propaganda. Its news coverage rarely rose above what critics rightly derided as 'protocol news'. The ostensible aim of Doordarshan was to educate and inform, though it remained a mouthpiece for the government of the day, reflected especially in the way its information bureaucrats ran news operations. The

partial privatization of the airwaves started with the introduction of advertising onto the state broadcaster in the 1970s, followed by sponsored programmes, and received a boost as India opened up to transnational media corporations in the 1990s (Mehta, 2008).

The deregulation policy of DD, which was instrumental in commercialization of the news and current affairs sector, helped the emergence of competitive domestic news television, especially at a time when other national and multinational media companies like Murdoch-owned STAR (Satellite Television Asia Region) TV and Zee TV (India's largest media conglomerate) were trying to set foot in a highly competitive Indian market. DD lost its audience to rival channels like Star News and Zee News while private channels impressed the audience with high-production values and digital transmission. Unlike DD, the private players recognised the possibility of combining news with show-business and advertising (Butcher, 2003; Thussu, 2007; Chaudhuri, 2010). As elsewhere, Indian broadcasting space, too, has been reconfigured by what Hallin and Mancini have described as the 'triumph of the liberal model' (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 251) of media, partly 'because its global influence has been so great and because neo-liberalism and globalization continue to diffuse liberal media structures and ideas' (ibid: 305).

Further deregulation during the 2000s transformed the television industry: by 2015 more than 800 digital channels were operating, including some joint ventures with international broadcasters reaching more than 500 million TV viewers (Thomas, 2010; Kohli-Khandekar, 2013; FICCI-KPMG, 2015). This unprecedented growth has been spurred on by an increase in advertising revenue as Western-based media conglomerates tap into the growing market of 300 million burgeoning middle class with enhanced and demonstrable purchasing power and media-induced aspirations to a consumerist lifestyle (Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase, 2008; FICCI-KPMG, 2015). While television news outlets have proliferated in such a liberalized and privatized new economy, the growing competition for audiences and, crucially, advertising revenue, has intensified. Not dissimilar to trends in the US, the growing commercialization of television news has forced broadcast journalists and television producers in India to recognise the need to make news entertaining. They borrow

and adapt ideas from entertainment and adopt an informal style with an emphasis on personalities, storytelling and spectacle (Thussu, 2007; Bhusan, 2013; Jain, 2015).

As cross-media ownership rules are relaxed, there is greater trend towards concentration of media power: non-media groups have invested heavily in television and telecommunication. Increasingly large companies are present across various segments of the media and entertainment world: new 'media conglomerates', drawing their inspiration from the US model, are in the making. One prominent example is Reliance, one of India's largest conglomerates, which since 2013 owns Network 18, the company that also operates CNN/IBN, one of India's leading English language news networks (Raman, 2014). As in the US, where such moves have been reinforced by the take-over of news networks by huge media corporations, whose primary interest is in the entertainment business: notable examples include Viacom-Paramount (CBS News); Disney (ABC News); Time-Warner (CNN) and News Corporation (Fox News), in India too media conglomerates who make profit in entertainment industry have investments in news networks. Such ownership structures can be reflected in the type of stories - about celebrities from the world of entertainment and sport, for example - that receive prominence in news programmes, thus strengthening corporate synergies.

In the process, symbiotic relationships between the news and new forms of current affairs and factual entertainment genres, such as reality TV have developed, blurring the boundaries between news, documentary and entertainment. Such hybrid programming feeds into and benefits from the 24/7 news cycle: providing a feast of visually arresting, emotionally-charged infotainment which sustains ratings and keeps production costs low. The growing global popularity of such infotainment-driven programming indicates the success of this formula (Thussu, 2007). In India, as one commentator has noted, entertainment and infotainment dominate the 'ABC of Media - Advertising, Bollywood and Corporate Power' (Sainath, 2010).

News as infotainment

In a fiercely competitive and crowded market such as the one in India, news networks are under constant pressure to raise their TRPs (Television Rating Points)

and acquire new programming to ensure regular stream of advertising revenue. There is a tendency to make news entertaining, which in the context of India means drawing on Bollywood or Bollywoodized content. Such infotainment fare is now common practice on news networks which regularly broadcast 'exclusive' stories about the supernatural and the bizarre as examples of compelling TV. There is a noticeable change in style and content away from a considered, professional approach to a flashier and visually more dynamic presentation; the emphasis seems to be not on the journalistic skills of news anchors and reporters but on how they look on camera, with style taking precedence over substance. An informal, entertaining schedule is created to increase the audience base, across the channels, ratings and revenues delivering programmes - sports, entertainment and lifestyle - have increased, while news and analysis have shown a corresponding decline.

Is commodification of television news and its growing politicisation expanding or eroding the public discourse in the world's largest democracy? Given the symbolic and semiotic power of television news, is infotainment-driven television news contributing to making India a producer and consumer of commodity capitalism? Given the obsession with Bollywoodized content and its regionalized clones that characterize much of television content, the 'public' aspects of news seem to have been undermined (Rajagopal, 2009; Nayar, 2009; Thomas, 2010). The popularization of celebrity-driven and sensationalist news may have made it a more marketable commodity, but this has also debased public discourse, increasingly aiming at the lowest common denominator.

Much of television news has almost negligible reporting of rural poverty or of developmental issues in general, as they rarely translate into ratings or interest advertisers, on whose support the edifice of a commercial television news is ultimately based. It has been suggested that in a market-driven economy, the media system 'is not only closely linked to the *ideological* dictates of the business-run society, it is also an integral element of the economy' (McChesney, 1999: 281, italics in original). As a recent study by two eminent economists notes: 'A lack of serious involvement in the diagnosis of significant injustices and inefficiencies in the economic and social lives of people; and also the absence of high-quality journalism,

with some honourable exceptions, about what could enhance the deprived and constrained lives of many – often most – people in the country, even as the media presents a glittering picture of the privileged and the successful' (Drèze and Sen, 2013:7).

If excessive marketization has contributed to privileging sport and celebrity spectacle in the news, the shift from bureaucrats to marketing executives has also influenced the politics of television news. News is increasingly shrill, bipartisan and noisy. During Doordarshan's monopoly of broadcast news, news on television was considered little more than the government's view of the day's events, with only primary definers of news – mostly politicians and other elite groups - dominating the discourse. In terms of presentation and style, the news was bland and bureaucratic: audience interest did not matter, as there was no competition with private television. The new visibility of television news has brought new actors on to the national arena as well as influencing the actions of those being filmed. The way television news covered the conflict in Kargil in 1999 – India's first televised war (Thussu, 2002) - and the communal violence in Gujarat in 2002, the first major riots of the 24-hour television age (Jain, 2010), is indicative of the power of visuals to shape the public agenda.

As most of television news is in private control, what happens to the public aspects of broadcasting in a country where, despite strong economic growth, more than 300 million people live in poverty – the world's largest chunk of poor people in a single country? The infotainment-driven television news has not yet reached large parts of rural and semi-urban India, where Doordarshan still reigns supreme, despite severe competition from private news networks – especially in cable and satellite homes. In 2015, Doordarshan was reaching more than 500 million viewers, while DD News, the first and the only terrestrial news channel in the country, had the highest reach into television households. Though not as bland as during its monopoly days, DD News still lacks the edge and critical dimension that at least some private channels have earned in the past decade of operation (Rao, 2010). As Cottle and Rai suggest, 'In a diverse and plural polity such as India, the communicative structures of television news are particularly important in that they variously enable or disable the public elaboration of conflicting interests and identities (Cottle and Rai, 2008: 77). Networks

such as NDTV 24x7 have arguably broadened the public discourse in India, bringing on board, for example, questions about environmental protection and right to information. The network has undertaken campaigns to promote particular causes and generated both revenues and more importantly awareness on issues such as protecting India's national animal, the tiger. Such instances may be characterised by what Cottle and Rai have called 'the campaigning frame', which 'declares the news outlet's stance on a particular issue or cause and typically seeks to galvanize sympathies and support for its intervention, political or otherwise, beyond the world of journalism' (Cottle and Rai, 2008: 83).

Indian TV news in the global media sphere

The growing profile of India on the global scene has been helped by the increasing visibility of its cultural and creative industries, its diaspora, and its media operating in a vibrant and expanding media sphere in one of the world's fastest growing economies (despite the global economic downturn, in 2014, India still posted an economic growth of 6 per cent). Given the size and scale of the Indian television industry and the globalization of Indian businesses, the Indian version of news has potentially an audience base, beyond the diasporic one. 'By enriching the content of the coverage and analyses of news', write Drèze and Sen, 'the Indian media could certainly be turned into a major asset in the pursuit of justice, equity, and efficiency in democratic India' (Drèze and Sen, 2013: 7).

Unlike those in the Western world, the media and cultural industries in India are growing rapidly: in 2013, the Indian entertainment and media industry was worth \$29 billion, with a steady annual growth rate. International investment is increasing in India's media sector, as cross-media ownership rules are relaxed (Thomas, 2010; Kohli-Khandekar, 2013; FICCI/KPMG Report, 2015). At the same time, Indian media companies are also investing outside national territories. In the past two decades, India has become an important source of media products, both indigenous, as well as a production base for transnational – largely US-based media conglomerates (UNCTAD, 2010).

However, India's communication of its developments to a general global audience remains limited, given the US-UK domination of international news and a woeful lack of visibility of Indian news media in the broadcasting scene. This is ironic for a nation with a highly developed model of journalism and the increasing presence of Indian-born or Indian-origin journalists working for leading global news outlets. Unlike many other developing countries, India has a long tradition of politically engaged journalism, with its roots in the anti-colonial nationalist movement. An intellectual engagement with the wider world is a rich legacy of Indian journalism. Indian democracy has been underpinned by a journalism which has by and large delivered its Fourth Estate function.

India is also one of the world's largest English-language television news markets, as many of its news channels broadcast in English (Athique, 2012; Kohli-Khandekar, 2013; FICCI-KPMG, 2015). Some of these channels – especially those broadcasting in English - have a global reach and ambition. NDTV's flagship channel NDTV 24x7 was available in 2015 in the US (via DirecTV), the UK (BSkyB), the Middle East (Arab Digital Distribution) and southern Africa (Multi-choice Africa). Indian companies are in partnerships with global news players such as CNN-IBN, an English news and current affairs channel, launched in 2005, in association with TV-18 Group. The NDTV Group had strategic ties with NBC, while *Times Now*, owned by the *Times of India* Group (publisher of the *Times of India*, the world's largest English-language broadsheet daily newspaper in terms of circulation), ran a joint news operation with Reuters between 2006-2008. The growth of English-language journalism in India should open up possibilities for journalistic opportunities offered by the globalization of Indian media industries.

Paradoxically, Indian journalism and media in general is losing interest in the wider world at a time when Indian industry is increasingly globalizing and international engagement with India is growing from across the globe. As for news networks, NDTV 24x7 is the most widely watched internationally. The absence of Doordarshan in the global media sphere can be ascribed to bureaucratic apathy and inefficiency, though in an age of what Seib has called 'real-time diplomacy' the need to take communication seriously has never been greater (Seib, 2012). For private news

networks, the need for global expansion is limited, since, in market terms, news has a relatively small audience and therefore meagre advertising revenue.

However, perhaps taking inspiration from China, the Indian government has belatedly woken up to promoting its external broadcasting. An eight-member committee headed by Sam Pitroda, Advisor to the Prime Minister of India on Public Information Infrastructure and Innovation has recommended that Prasar Bharati, India's Public Sector Broadcaster, should have a 'global outreach' (Prasar Bharati, 2014). Its vision is ambitious: 'Create a world-class broadcasting service benchmarked with the best in the world using next-generation opportunities, technologies, business models and strategies. The platform should be designed for new media first and then extended to conventional TV. Outline an effective content strategy for Prasar Bharati's global platforms (TV and Radio) focused on projecting the national view rather than the narrow official viewpoint' (Prasar Bharati, 2014: 15).

Recommending professional and financial autonomy, with latest technological support, the committee suggested that such internationalization would contribute to India's soft power. The objective of this 'global outreach strategy' should be to create a strong international presence, using all possible platforms and content 'to portray the story of emerging India and its vibrant democracy to the world: its cultural diplomacy and soft power and influence opinion about India. Uniquely Indian themes such as Yoga, Ayurveda or Bollywood are obvious areas but information about Indian business successes and the richness and diversity of the country need prominence.

A subaltern global voice?

As one of the founder members of the Non-Aligned Movement, India pursued a largely autonomous foreign policy. It was a leading voice during the 1970s and 1980s debates within UNESCO about the creation of a New World Information and Communication Order. India was a founder member of the Non-aligned News Agencies Pool, an attempt to encourage South-South news exchange to counter Western information hegemony. In the age of BRICS, coinciding with cracks within

the neo-liberal model of US-led capitalism, there is now talk of Non-Alignment 2.0 (Khilnani *et al*, 2012).

Will the presence of Indian news on the international scene pose challenges to the Western-dominated news agendas? One area where a global Indian news presence could make a difference is in the field of development communication: it was the first country to use television for education through its 1970s Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) programme. India remains home to the world's largest population of poor people: on every major indices of social progress, it shows abysmally low ranking, despite demonstrating robust economic growth and lifting millions out of poverty in the past two decades. India and Indian media therefore have a moral and material imperative to be at the forefront of shaping discourse about how to deploy media and communication tools for poverty alleviation programmes internationally. They can draw on the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi's egalitarian journalism (the iconic leader of India's independence movement edited for most of his political life the weekly newspaper *Young India*, later renamed *Harijan*).

More broadly, Indian journalism evolved within the context of a fight for democracy in the tradition of anti-colonialism, represented by leaders like Gandhi. After independence, a 'Third Worldist,' anti-imperialist ideology continued to define mainstream media under Nehruvian socialism. Making use of this legacy of articulating the voice of the global South, it can make a contribution to international debates, beyond World Bank-dictated anti-poverty programmes. As digital media and communication become more commercialized, India's could be an important voice in articulating Southern viewpoints and perspectives in global forums like UNESCO, ITU and WIPO on such diverse and contested issues as multiculturalism, intellectual property rights in the digital environment; safeguarding of media plurality and indigenous media.

Apart from the globalization of Indian news media, the growing Indian presence within the international non-governmental sector, multilateral bureaucracies, and the development communication field could be harnessed to this end (Tharoor, 2012; Thussu, 2013). Would an Indian media perspective on events in other developing

countries be less affected by the colonial mindset? The proliferation of news networks and the multiplicity of other media outlets have contributed to the freedom from government control and arguably democratized public communication. In such a news environment, citizens have access to a wider range of information and journalists can help to give voice to disadvantaged and seek accountability from politicians and bureaucrats (Rao, 2010; Roy, 2012). From electoral politics to economy, to development issues, television news has a major role in shaping public opinion. Networks like NDTV 24X7 have taken up causes in the public interest – such as rural development, environmental protection, freedom of information, gender equality. Their efforts have at times influenced government policy. There is also a strong and growing tradition of investigative journalism to expose social and political misdemeanours, corruption and criminality.

However, such public-interest journalism is confined to a few notable exceptions. Most of television news is entrenched in a 'Bollywoodized' media culture, thriving on entertainment and infotainment-driven programming rooted in a crassly commercial media system (Thussu, 2007; Jain, 2015). By overwhelming public discourse with Bollywoodized content, egalitarian aspects are marginalized in the news media, at a time when more than 300 million people in India remain illiterate and the gap between the rich and the poor is growing, making India one of the world's most unequal societies, despite a democratic political system and impressive economic growth.

The issues that confront the Indian situation – about governance, sustainable development, pervasive poverty – have striking resonances in many other countries in the global South (Tharoor, 2012; Thussu, 2013). Despite India's gradual integration with the US-led neo-liberal economic system, as a producer and a consumer of commodity capitalism, there is a strong and deeply-entrenched tradition of argumentation and critical conversation in the Indian body politic and in its intellectual life, reflected also in journalistic discourses (Sen, 2005; Rajagopal, 2009). As Indian media globalize, will this critical mass contribute to strengthening the voice of those at the receiving end of the excesses of neo-liberalism, or will India under a

pro-business government of Narendra Modi play second fiddle to the US media, acting as surrogate to the US-dominated entertainment-driven news?

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'the multitude of news outlets and of delivery platforms have come to exert increasing pressure to be the first—often accompanied by compromises in not only the diversity of original sources, but also the ethics and quality of news offerings. (Parthasarathi and Srinivas, 2012: 141)

'Also evident is that the growing linguistic and geographical multitude of news outlets, spurred by digital technologies, has contributed to an absolute increase and widening of reportage on marginal concerns and marginalized people. Regional and local outlets, in particular, have consequently better addressed and amplified their immediate issues, which often went under- or un-addressed in the national media. Perhaps as a spin-off, such marginal issues and voices sometimes have also been reflected or amplified to a greater degree in dominant news outlets'. (Parthasarathi and Srinivas, 2012:141)

'In television news, there are strong tendencies toward sameness in the themes and emphasis of news, even in vernacular languages—coupled with a near uniform preference for sensational treatment'. (Parthasarathi and Srinivas, 2012: 142)

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