

# Battlefields of the Idiot Box-An Analysis of the Prime Time News Debates

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**Abstract**—The decade of 1990's was the era of liberalisation in India, which brought with itself a satellite revolution and helped in creating one of the world's largest television and media markets. The arrival of cable television led to the proliferation of hundreds of channels beamed from different countries. Some years later, Indian media landscape saw the emergence of 24 hour news channels, revolutionizing the news media industry which previously was under the government monopoly, and has brought with it, a much faster pace of news production and reporting, with constant updates. There are more than 100, 24 hour news channels in India as of today. An important part of these news channels are the prime time debate shows, having an anchor, and four to five panellists from diverse fields, deliberating over various issues ranging from politics, social, geo-politics, culture, economy to stock market. These prime time debates meant for constructive discussion and resolution of issues of importance and shaping public opinion, nowadays, for getting more viewership, television rating points and popularity have turned into a sensationalized mud-slinging exercise between participants, leading sometimes even to fist fights. They have normalized the art of shouting and screaming in the name of debates. The anchors themselves get angry and take sides. This research study will analyze the content of some of the prime time news debate shows in both English and Hindi language, to ascertain how these debates turn the normal studios into battlefields, where in everyone, from panellists to the anchor, want to prove their opinion, viewpoint or organization as correct with no regards for the actual aims or goals of the healthy, engaging and constructive debates or discussions.

## Introduction

News on television is one of the most prominent sources of information for people, who watch it to keep themselves abreast of day-to-day developments in politics and other spheres of life. With their reach and vast size, news channels have the potential of shaping and even manufacturing public opinion in the country. This function is further intensified with the arrival of 24-hour news channels. Among the various news shows of 24-hour channels, prime time slot which is telecast between 7.00 pm – 11.00 pm occupies the most important position, as it sums up important news events of the day. Nowadays, most channels have news debate shows at the prime-time, wherein, they debate over one or two of the important issues of the day. These flagship shows are the game changers for the channels garnering great TRPs and ensuring highest revenues and making them market leaders.

These shows are steered by their star anchors, and touch upon current, political and social issues that take place in the country with eminent personalities from diverse field on the panel, with the main idea behind being to raise issues that are pertinent to viewers and that force the authorities to answer and act. It is therefore no surprise that politicians today make it a point to appear on these shows and be seen debating key issues.

Having such importance, popularity and impact, it becomes necessary to analyze such shows in order to ascertain what they present to the people, how they present it and how they shape the public opinion and set the agenda for people to think and act.

## History of Broadcasting in India

Broadcasting began in India with the setting-up of a private radio service in Madras in 1924, and a little later in Bombay and Calcutta. Their daily broadcasts of 2 to 3 hours consisted mainly of music and talks. These stations had to close down in 1927 for lack of sufficient financial support. It was followed by the setting up a Broadcasting Service that began broadcasting in India in July 1927 on an experimental basis at Bombay and a month later at Calcutta under an agreement between the Government of India and a private company called the Indian Broadcasting Company Ltd. Faced with a widespread public outcry against the closure of the IBC, the Government acquired its assets and constituted the Indian Broadcasting Service under the Department of Labour and Industries. Since then, broadcasting in India has remained under Government control. In 1936, a radio station was commissioned in Delhi. In the same year, the Indian Broadcasting Service was renamed All India Radio (AIR) and a new signature tune was added. The Delhi station became the nucleus of broadcasting at the national level.

All India Radio has come a long way since June 1936. Radio broadcasting assumed considerable importance with the outbreak of World War II. By 1939, the entire country was covered by a short-wave service and the programme structure underwent a change to meet wartime contingencies. During this period, news and political commentaries were introduced

and special broadcasts were made for the people on the strategic northeastern and northwestern borders. When India became Independent, the AIR network had only six stations at Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Lucknow and Tiruchirapalli with 18 transmitters - six on the medium wave and the remaining on short wave, Radio listening on medium wave was confined to the urban elite of these cities. After Independence, the broadcast scenario has dramatically changed with 198 broadcasting centers, including 74 local radio stations, covering more than 97.3 per cent of the country's population. Presently, it broadcasts programmes in a number of languages throughout the day. The function in of All India Radio is unparalleled in sense that it is perhaps the only news organizations, which remain active, round-the-clock and never sleeps. Mostly the broadcasting centers are full-fledged stations with a network of medium wave, short wave and FM transmission. Besides, the External Services Division of AIR is a link with different regions of world through its programmes in as many as 24 languages for about 72 hours a day.

Presently, AIR is utilizing satellite services for transmission of its programmes throughout the country with a radio networking, and with the introduction of Radio Paging Service, FM transmitter has become the landmark of AIR.

Today, it counts among the few largest broadcasting networks in the world to serve the mass communication needs of the pluralistic population of India. The network has expanded gradually, imbibing new technologies and programme production techniques.

Television in India started much later in 1959 as a part of All India Radio, and as an educational project supported by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Ford Foundation, when it was formally commissioned on September 15 as an experimental service. Its aim was to promote social education and general awareness. It was not until Mrs. Indira Gandhi was in charge of the Information and Broadcasting Ministry that television was commissioned as a regular daily service from 15th August 1965. Television was based on the model of a public broadcasting system prevalent in many countries of Europe. In independent India, the political leaders recognized the value of information and its use for accelerating the process of development. Thus was started a model of public broadcasting committed to inform, educate and entertain the people. In its early years, apart from being used as an educational tool, television was also misused as a mouthpiece for the central government and the party in power. Programming was primarily in Hindi and much of the news and current affairs focussed on Delhi – the seat of political power [18].

On August 1, 1975 a Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) was launched with the help of an American Satellite for a period of one year when 2400 villages in six states - Orissa, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh,

Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka were exposed to area specific programmes beamed with the help of the satellite. The experiment was successful and was universally lauded. The programme content had the three necessary ingredients of entertainment, education and information. There was no denying that Doordarshan had become a catalyst to social change. One of the most popular programmes of Doordarshan has been the rural programme called "Krishi Darshan" which was launched on 26 January 1967. Doordarshan also caters to many schools and universities in the country through its Educational TV and Open University programmes.

Indian television in its infancy was managed by All India Radio. In 1976, television was separated from radio and given a new name – Doordarshan[2]. The practice of accepting advertisements on Doordarshan was started in 1976. Television went commercial from January 1, 1976 and a good numbers of sponsored programmes were telecast on Doordarshan, increasing its revenue. By the mid-1970s, the proportion of entertainment programmes including feature films and song and dance sequences along with commercial advertisements and sports coverage had increased considerably while the school and rural telecasts had begun to take a backseat[3].

In 1982, before the Asian games to be held in Delhi National broadcasting was introduced. With the Asian games also came colour television in India, Doordarshan went into colour and created its own national network through the help of INSAT- I A. Now with the help of INSAT-1B and Microwave facilities, Doordarshan was able to cater to a very wide area of the country in terms of imparting information and entertainment. Some of the significant presentations have been the IX Asian Games, the NAM summit, the CHOGUM conference, Republic Day Parades, Independence Day Celebrations, etc.

### **The Era of Liberalization and its Impact on Broadcasting**

The central government launched a series of economic and social reforms in 1991 under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao. The new economic policies launched in India in 1991 brought in considerable reforms in the world of industry and trade by opening up the capital market to private enterprises and providing operational freedom to private sector. It was a turnaround from the 'strategy of self-reliance' that was followed for more than forty years in the independent India to wide-ranging policy reforms and deregulations to "promote the growth of a more efficient and competitive industrial economy" [4]. The 'New Economic Policy' was dominantly focused on policy of liberalization under the economic agenda as part of neo-liberal reforms supported by international financial institutions and Western developed capitalist economies. The policy of liberalization in general is withdrawal of state from economic affairs, end of licence-permit Raj, greater role to private sectors in economy and a free market. The globalization and liberalization of economy included flow of technology and flow of foreign capital in terms of investment with relaxed norms and regulations than those before 1991.

Transnational and domestic private corporations have thereafter become decisive factors in the economic growth of the nation. This also had a lasting impact on the working of democratic institutions and functional freedom of mass media in India.

The field of media and mass communication in India had been distinct in its ownership pattern till 1991, with the print industry enjoying the freedom of private ownership from the beginning whereas the broadcast media of radio and television under the complete control of the Government. The only radio was Akashvani or All India radio (AIR) and the only television, Doordarshan. Long demand to end the state control of electronic media and its de-monopolization started becoming a reality with the structural changes in economy. This monopoly of the government in the broadcast media ended in 1991, with the implementation of the liberalization policies. This opened the doors for private players to start their operation in electronic media and to compete with the government controlled electronic media. As a result, the private media enterprises (both domestic and foreign) proliferated in the media market. By 2010, every major foreign transnational media investor was in India [5].

With Liberalization, started an era of transnational communication through cable and satellite television that began with the flow of global content to Indian viewers in 1991. India switched its position from as a State of highly regulated media policies and that with a monopoly of government in the sector, to a de-regulated open broadcasting market[6], ending the single channel era and entering the multi channel era of 'stiff competition' [7]. This was followed by unforeseen growth of cable network, and availability and accessibility to foreign television programmes and multi channel televisions. While the number of cable operators in India in 1985 was merely 100, the number rose to 10,000 by the first quarter of 1991 and to about 70,000 by 1996. The growth of satellite channels rose to a stunning 500% in the first year [8].

This came to be known as "sky invasion", i.e, the invasion of the households by private channels both Indian and foreign. The speed with which the private channels have expanded in India is an example in itself. The important point here is that this expansion has occurred in spite of and despite the government. The Indian government never wanted to provide up-linking facilities perhaps being afraid of the cultural invasion. But channels, including Indian channels, started up-linking from foreign soils like Kathmandu and Hong Kong and no technology available today can afford to block the down linking. This "sky invasion" coupled with rapid expansion of cable network has actually converted the entire urban and semi urban India into a big global village. The number of television owing household has also increased tremendously within a few years. This has to be noted and appreciated and also critically examined as this has happened in a record time unlike the Western countries where it took

about 20 years. The Indian society has in fact leap-frogged at least in the field of television usage.

Post-1991 satellite television in India has become transnational in nature. The implications were private ownership in disguised forms, absence of censorship or any such controls, autonomy and commercialization of the medium and economic, political and cultural implications of transnational messages.

### **Start of 24 hour News Channels**

Liberalization in the 1990s transformed the television landscape in India and created one of the world's biggest, if not *the* biggest television market. In the news media sector before 1990s, Doordarshan had monopolized newscast on Indian television, but the arrival of private national and international news channels, provided to the people an alternative to the state controlled Doordarshan, and simultaneously increased the choices before the citizens: first, to choose the source of news and information of their choice; second, to cross check the authenticity of the facts in the news; third and final, to avail the diversity in opinions, interpretations, and analysis. News programmes became very popular and are vying for attention with other popular programmes telecast in different channels. All major television broadcasters are including at least one news channel to their bouquet. The private channels made the news an essential commodity like food, cloth and shelter. This has had a huge impact on the television news sector making India the country with the largest number of commercial news channels in the world – one in 1998 to 65 in 2009 [9].

In August 1991, Richard Li launched Star Plus, the first satellite channel beamed the signal to Indian subcontinent. Subhash Chandra's Zee TV appeared in October 1992. It is India's first privately owned Hindi channel to cater the interest of Indian viewers. This ignition followed by Sony and a little later by domestic channels such as Eenadu, Asianet and Sun TV. Doordarshan planned to sell some slots for news programme under sponsored category. In February 1995, NDTV becomes the country's first private producer of the national news 'News Tonight', which aired on the country's government-owned Doordarshan set a new landmark for Indian television because of its on-the-spot reporting with pertinent visuals. In the same year, TV Today Network occupied a 20 minutes slot in DD Metro channel and aired a Hindi and current affairs programme 'Aaj Tak'. This programme became popular for its comprehensive coverage and unique style presentation by Late S. P. Singh. Besides that Nalini Singh's five-minute fast paced, condensed daily news capsule Ankhon Dekhi, TV Today Network's Business Aaj Tak and Newstrack was aired on the Metro channel of Doordarshan.

Within 50 years of its arrival, television has established itself as the most powerful and the most popular medium of communication for information, ideas, values and skills. Its

potency and influence as carrier of news are phenomenal. The secret of this extraordinary power of television as a news medium is that it is for its public of the closest and the most approximate thing to actually witnessing a news-event rather than receiving a verbal or written account of it, as through radio or the press. Economic liberalization, deregulation and privatization contributed to the expansion of Indian media corporations, facilitated by joint ventures with international media conglomerates, with many western transnational media players entering the 'emerging market' of India – potentially one of the world's biggest English-language television markets, leading to the emergence of 24-hour news channels, disseminating news and views round the clock.

The proliferation of private news channels has been the biggest change in the last twenty years of the news media. These channels have changed the whole outlook of news. People now no longer have to wait for a particular time to see the daily news and happening.

### **Prime-Time News Debate Shows**

An important part of the 24 hour news channels are the news debate shows, especially the Prime-Time debate shows, which are the stars of their respective channels. These flagship shows are the game changers for the channels garnering great TRPs and ensuring highest revenues and making them market leaders. These shows are steered by their star anchors, and touch upon current, political and social issues that take place in the country with eminent personalities from diverse field on the panel, with the main idea behind being to raise issues that are pertinent to viewers and that force the authorities to answer and act.

BARC data reflects that four channels in the top five list have debates in their prime-time slots. They have been more favorable and profitable for the English news channels.

Most news debates begin with the news presenter reading out the headlines of important news stories which are displayed on the screen simultaneously. Then the presenter picks the issue at debate and introduces the panel. Usually, such panels have 2-8 experts excluding the presenter. As moderator, the presenter poses questions at each of the panelists and provides them with a certain amount of time to respond. In cases where the panelists are not able to be present at the studio, they are linked to the newsroom through video or over phone and insets of their photographs are displayed along with their names and designations. This, obviously, is a practice followed globally by most of the news channels. After ensuring that all sides of the issue are covered, the presenter concludes the debate and goes for a commercial break.

With the debates dominating the prime-time slot, news have been relegated to tickers and slugs at the bottom of the screen during this time. Most of these debate shows continue from 7 p.m to 11:00 p.m.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objective of this Research Study was to analyse the content of various Prime-Time News Debate shows to know how these debates meant for constructive and useful discussions over issues of importance have turned into battlefields, wherein everyone is trying to prove their viewpoint as correct.

### **Sample**

The Sample for the study included the content of the Prime-Time News Debate shows of two leading English and Hindi news channels in India, selected through BARC (Broadcast and Research Council of India) ratings, world's largest Television audience measurement service. The sample was 'The Debate with Arnab Goswami' on Republic TV, and 'The News Hour Debate' on Times Now, for English News Channels, and 'Dangal' on Aaj Tak, and 'Puchta hai Bharat' on Republic Bharat, for Hindi News Channels. These Programmes get the highest TRPs and the highest advertising revenue and are usually advertised as the flagship programs of the channels. The content was accessed through their online archives.

### **Methodology**

This research is interested in examining the nature of the content of the Prime-Time news debate shows. Hence, Content Analysis, which is the common and popular method for analyzing media content, and emphasizes the 'objective' identification of patterns, will be helpful in providing answers the research is seeking. Content analysis will bring in rigor and neutrality of natural scientific inquiry to this study of media content.

### **Findings and Analysis**

An analysis of the content of the selected prime-time news debate shows across the different news channels revealed that there is not much difference between the top news debate shows across channels or language.

In the crucial prime-time band, the reporters disappear and all the channels appear increasingly identical, the only difference being the anchors, who take the centre stage along with panelists who are often repeated, with some even appearing on more than one channel at the same time and simultaneously responding to the same set of questions on the concerned issue, during prime time across most of the news networks. With some people in the newsroom, some connected by video, and many mini-screens debating, screaming and violently fighting to prove their point, they are less of debate and more of slanging matches, wherein the viewer is unable to make out, at most times, the flow of arguments.

The nature of the debates was found to be adversarial. Impoliteness, abusive language and aggression have become the hallmark of these TV debates at prime time as news

channels compete to attract viewers. It is routine for TV news anchors to yell at panelists and for guests to yell back and at each other. As anchors pit participants against one another to raise TRPs and promote a certain political agenda, panelists yell as much as anchors. Some panelists known for their loud voice and for giving controversial statements are invited often.

Some feature common to all these shows are interesting and creative hashtags, sensational misrepresentation of events, incomplete coverage, exaggerated coverage of non-issues to create a certain attitude amongst people, inherent bias and patronizing attitude towards critical issues have resulted in jutting out a horribly skewed understanding of national issues.

### Conclusions

In India, there are approximate 130 million subscribers of cable TV (both DTH and traditional cable); and out of those, around 40-50% do watch news related channels at least once a week. With such a huge proportion of viewers & readers accessing national and international news and creating opinions based on the same, it becomes very important to know the content, trends and credibility of the news content that we are exposed to. On the question of prime time debates being shown on news channels, of a survey conducted by Indian IRIS, a news publication group founded by ex-IITians, ex-IIMians and research fellows from some of the top global Universities, to find out the trust level experienced by viewers of mainstream media, 70% of the surveyed viewers found them as chaotic without any meaning, and full of noise. 23% found them as 'entertaining' and only 7% actually found some value in it.

Debates are a healthy form of discourse that has today been reduced to a mudslinging fest, by the big media houses, with the anchors holding a pre conceived notion. Panelists outsmart one another by the superiority of their decibel levels and not by the force of their arguments. Also a debate is meant to pin accountability but in the name of accountability all we are achieving today is pointing fingers. In most of the debates today, sensationalism has replaced sense to the point where one wonders whether an Indo-Pak border war will first begin inside a television studio. Chaos has replaced credibility.

Most top rated debate shows today seem to resort to hyper-sensationalism and chest-thumping jingoism, wherein, they believe that, it is easier to influence and convince people through emotions rather than factual evidence, for example, in the aftermath of Pulwama suicide attack, Arnab Goswami started the hashtag #IndiaWants Revenge from his primetime debate show, where he was shouting for revenge from Pakistan and anti-nationals of India. The thing, lead to more unfortunate events where Kashmiri students were beaten-up by angry mobs all over India.

In some debates, people go beyond the usual war of words and start pushing each other and indulge into fights, and in some the anchors well as the panelists get personal. Recently, a FIR

was registered against the anchor of a regional prime-time debate show for inciting communal passions.

Debates must not mean disruption, all panelists must get equal time to voice their opinion. The anchor should play the role of a moderator and not of a partisan participant and must not begin with a conclusion in mind. All the panelists must ensure a healthy and constructive discussion aimed at arriving at a consensus or a solution to the issue in question.

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