

Emerging Trends in the News Media Industry Between 2013 and 2023 in India

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I. INTRODUCTION

News media is a vast term, encompassing all forms of multimedia that can be used to relay information, such as social media platforms, YouTube, podcasts, television, and even different print mediums like newspapers and magazines. The Indian news media industry has undergone significant transformations over the past decade. These emerging trends include the rise of social media journalism, which encompasses influencer journalism; a slurry of journalist arrests, especially those that are critical of the ruling government in India; the decline of print media; and lastly, the shift to short-form news clips.

Digitization has transformed the way news is produced and consumed. As misinformation and rumour-mongering take centre stage on all social media platforms, it will increasingly become difficult to rely upon any information one receives from these platforms, as it must be fact-checked. On the other hand, the declining print media industry and the rise of influencer journalism also act as significant threats because they blur the line between professional journalism and citizen journalism. It begs us to ask the question: Should everyone with a following and influence be allowed to speak on global and political matters? With the future impact of AI looming large, it is essential to maintain journalistic ethics and values to preserve the industry's integrity.

The Influence of Political Leaders on Media Establishments and Their Negative Effects on Society

As highlighted by Devam Thapa, 'social media in India has evolved from being a tool for civic engagement to a platform for rumour-mongering, influence peddling, and propaganda'. To remain relevant in the years ahead, it will become imperative for the Indian news media industry not to become the PR house for the ruling party and to continue producing neutral, fact-checked, and high-quality news content.

The influence of Indian political leaders on media establishments has become a nationwide concern. Press censorship has become a common practice as the government continues to gain more control over media outlets. Political journalists who criticise the government can be threatened with arrest under the UAPA (*India Code: Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967*). Those media outlets that don't conform to government agendas risk being sacked or replaced. 'Between 2013 and 2019, editors of channels and publications were removed and replaced because of their criticism of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (Tajammul-ul-Islam, 2019). If such censorship attacks are not addressed and dealt with, they will inhibit free speech, which lies at the heart of a functioning democracy.

Furthermore, Manipur, in the North-East region of India, has been engulfed in violence since May 2023, when clashes broke out between two predominant tribes in the state. The minority Kuki-Zomi and majority Meitei tribes have since been locked in a civil war-like situation with no end in sight. The state is governed by the BJP, and multiple protests in the state have asked for CM Biren Singh's resignation, who is said to have instigated the riots with his provocative remarks against the Kuki-Zomi tribes. The majority of Meitei tribes are mostly Hindu, and the Kuki-Zomi tribes are Christian, which is why CM Biren Singh has also been accused of promoting Hindu majoritarianism. On December 31, 2023, Wangkhemcha Shyamjai, the editor of the vernacular daily Kangleipaki Meira, and on January 5, 2024, the editor of Meitei language newspaper Hueiyen Lanpao, Dhanabir Maibam, were arrested for 'promoting enmity on the grounds of religion and race'. (PTI, 2024) The following arrests were condemned by members of the opposition as well as the citizens of Manipur, to no avail. The BJP's information blockade during a conflict is increasingly authoritarian and does more harm than good.

As media outlets have become increasingly government-controlled, censorship has become more prevalent. The government's ability to censor information can be seen in the suppression of coverage of protests and the general lack of critical reporting on government policies. In December, during the winter session of the Indian parliament, three laws that would completely usurp the Indian Penal Code, the basis of the criminal justice system in India, were passed without any opposition members in sight. "Law-making in the absence of a significant number of opposition members does not reflect well on the legislature" (The Hindu, 2023). Around

140 members of the opposition were suspended from parliament when the bills were passed. Although Union Minister Amit Shah claimed that the revised 'Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita' was now a purely Indian legal framework, no laws in the new bill suggest a pathbreaking change that is indigenous to the Indian diaspora in terms of policing, the way trials are conducted, or crimes are investigated. On the other hand, the changes that have been made are dubious and give the ruling government sweeping powers to shut down all forms of criticism and protest.

While citizens don't have access to transparent and independent information, making informed decisions is difficult. Censorship is antithetical to a true democracy, and the Indian government's involvement in the press will eventually have a very detrimental effect on society.

As Tajammul-ul-Islam and Sheikh have highlighted, 'Indian media has legitimised the ideology of promoting violence and riots while propagating Hindu majoritarianism, making it difficult for the media to stand against political influence'.

The Corporatisation of Indian Media

Governmental media censorship combined with corporate monopolisation is a deadly cocktail for any functioning democracy. "Adani entered the media industry in March last year by acquiring Quintillion Business Media, which operates the business and financial news digital media platform, BQ Prime. Later in December 2022, it acquired almost a 65% stake in the broadcaster NDTV." (India's Adani Group to acquire Controlling Stake News Agency Ians). Their latest bid involves gaining complete management and operational control over IANS (Indo-Asian News Service). The Adani Group has been notorious for its escapades for a long time, but their recent purchases are alarming, considering their close relationship with the ruling party.

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) recommends that corporate conglomerates with cross-media ownership should not exist because they infringe upon the freedom of expression within a media company. A company's loyalties lie with its benefactors, leading to narrative-driven reporting that is beneficial for business. The Delhi Union of Journalists stated, "Our life experience of working within the media tells us that there is a great deal of unknown, unvoiced censorship within the media that stems from patterns of ownership and employment." (Thakurta, 2013). Cross-media ownership can also be used to stifle plurality and dissent, especially if both media content and its distribution are controlled by a single entity.

The Emergence of Social Media Journalism and its Impact on Traditional News Media

Social Media, as everyone has realised, is a double-edged sword. While being an essential tool for civic engagement, it is often used as a medium to spread fake news and propaganda, thus serving a particular party's interests. The onset of digitization has brought with it a multitude of new tools that are now being utilised as channels to engage with media. These new media technologies act as facilitators of thought and expression, which were hitherto impossible with traditional forms of media such as print and TV. Giving meaning to one's thoughts and opinions on these platforms has often led to collective action against wrongs, but that's not always true. After the information blockade was lifted in Manipur, a slurry of videos and images started floating around on social media, depicting horrifying visuals of three women being paraded naked. As reported by The Quint, "The Meitei mob, while committing the horrifying sexual assault on three Kuki women in Manipur's Kangpokpi district on May 4, said it was an act of "revenge for the Churachandpur case," according to one of the survivors." (Varma, 2023) This is an apparent description of how online misinformation can lead to actual offline harm. The Meitei mob attacked the village under the impression that some Kuki-Zomi men had raped a Meitei nurse at a Churachandpur district hospital. This proved false, but the mob gathered at the village despite being notified that the information they had received was not true. This incident, which took place in May, came to light months after it took place because of the stringent internet shutdown in the state. An information blockade such as this plays a role in creating a space where the ruling party can create a narrative that suits their interests. "Now consider if the forums, where people expressed their angst against these socio-politico-economic situations where such platforms had their inherited vested interests, it is possible that either these sporadic voices of dissent be muted or that be labelled as [alternate] or non-state actors working to establish unrest in a nation-state." (Thapa, 2018)

Now the younger audience has taken an inclination towards shifting towards Instagram and YouTube as their primary sources of information rather than traditional news outlets like newspapers or news channels. Media consumption in India is not yet cannibalising traditional media, unlike other developed countries. "For the next several years, we expect India to remain a multi-modal market where all forms of media, including traditional media like TV and digital, will continue to co-exist." (*Media Consumption in India: Growing*, 2018)

However, we can expect a change in the next couple of years as the average Indian population is relatively young and their relationship with news media is largely dependent on social media channels. "Due to COVID-19, people have become so used to social media for various reasons, from gathering information, expressing themselves, interactions, and campaigns." (Reddy et al.) India also has the second-largest online

market after China. “According to the Digital News Report, the percentage of people drawing their news from social media is generally increasing, especially among eighteen to twenty-four-year-olds (Digital News Report, 2015).” The Gen X generation is more pulled towards artificial media hype created by bogus channels that haven’t followed traditional journalistic agenda-setting methods and rely on meme pages or clickbait to attract attention to their cause. “Far from being critically discreet about what they share, the general population is in it for the LOLs, the awe factor, and the weird-but-true and freaky curiosities of life”. (Vivian, 2018) Despite its increasing popularity, social media is the least reliable source to gather news, as they more often than not report on gossip instead of facts. The ruling BJP government understands how to use the media hype in their favour to divert public attention from essential matters to gimmicky antics. While Manipur continues to burn, Jammu and Kashmir continue to suffocate, and South India continues to become increasingly estranged from the mainland, the BJP PR house ensures that everyone appreciates the Prime Minister’s 2024 trip to Lakshadweep. In a bid to promote tourism, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently visited the Lakshadweep Islands, and the pictures from this visit have been heavily advertised and reported by virtually every news channel. This is not the first time that Indian users have engaged far more with non-essential news pieces because they were so heavily propagated, and neither will it be the last. Harnessing the power of the media has been an essential asset for the BJP since they first won the election in 2014, and they continue to use it to their advantage.

Instagram and YouTube have seen a surge in channels reporting on current events by the general public who aren’t professional journalist. This poses a significant risk to the credibility of the media industry, as it blurs the lines between professional journalists and citizens giving their opinions on a matter. Influencers and content creators have created a space for themselves on social media where they enjoy undivided control over public opinion. These private individuals make content on socio-political-economic events, and their content is then monetized in ways that have not been researched yet. Although there are studies outlining the role played by Facebook in the new economy, the same hasn’t been done yet for YouTube. Independent, self-funded media organisations that aren’t affiliated with a political party are also on the rise, which helps reduce the polarisation that is rampant in news channels on television. A media analysis news report by The Wire talked about how in the run-up to the 2019 elections, the country’s top-rated news channels, which included Aajtak, News 18, Zee, and India TV, focused on similar news stories like attacking Pakistan or praising the Indian Moon Mission, with shockingly little coverage on anything else of value. (Chisthi, 2020) There is a lot to be unpacked here, as not only the journalists but even their advertisers have propagated and encouraged hate speech on news channels, for views. The targeting or othering of one community has become a common sight, especially during elections. The rise of independent news channels is a positive trend in the current climate. Channels like Abhi and Niyu, Splainer, Firstpost, and Beetroot are often praised for their clear, concise, and eloquent reporting. Palki Sharma Upadhyay, the journalist who was first associated with WION news and then started her channel, Firstpost, is especially popular among the younger generation.

Independent news channels are quite different from influencers talking about politics. A report by ‘Rest of the World’ is predicting the 2024 election to be the influencer election. (Jaswal et al.) Several influencers have started taking political interviews, which are being posted to the BJP’s highly active social media account. All in a bid to curry favour with the young minds of the country. Unfortunately, this stream of news reporting is unregulated and dangerous, as most of these collaborations are done through paid promotion. Unchecked use of social media by political parties to increase their grandstanding can mislead a whole generation.

The Threat of AI

Behind social media, the threat of AI looms large as media organisations start their mass layoffs to use AI to generate articles for them. The first to jump on this bandwagon was BuzzFeed. Most other news organisations that have tried the same have been caught with their hands in the cookie jar. Sports Illustrated was also accused of uploading AI-generated articles, after which the CEO was promptly fired and an investigation was launched. Google is developing AI technology to write news articles and help optimise articles to make journalists’ work easier. News channels like Odisha TV have also started broadcasting news with an AI news anchor named ‘Lisa’. AI models are still in development, and their capabilities are still being discovered. AI research might peak in 2025, but there’s no doubt that the onset of this trend will have grave implications for the news industry.

To sum up, through the examination of various sources and examples that illustrate the thesis of the essay, we can confidently come to the conclusion that there are numerous factors that are affecting the proliferation and consumption of traditional news sources like print media. At the same time, we in the journalism community need to be wary of AI. While AI can be beneficial in coming up with ideas, it cannot replace a human’s sensibilities and perspectives when writing or presenting any sort of news. With these emerging trends in contemporary Indian media sources, journalists also need to be extra cautious when proceeding with reporting on any sort of news, irrespective of whether it is politically motivated or not. What epitomises the profession of journalism is its ethics and its values, which need to be steadfastly held close to the

heart. Lastly, with the increase in arrests of reporters and journalists, the industry needs to rally together to fight for the democratisation of the profession, where everyone has the right to dissent against the government, leading to the proliferation of various perspectives, thereby increasing chances for healthy discussions related to the human condition and how it is tied to and influenced by the ruling government.

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