

Newspapers and Primacies in Elections: A Comparative Study of Coverage in Two Mainstream English Dailies

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Elections are the mechanism under a democratic system to form a government. Invariably, during elections, the power remains in the hands of the people- being able to demonstrate their grumbles and elect the representatives of their choice. To choose among alternatives, people need to know the candidates and political parties with reference to various public issues. The mass media are the channels through which public could able to know socio-political, and economic issues in their country. In the modern marketing driven media world, news about public interests has diminished due to over-dependence of news media on sensational political stuff. Media has obligation to give adequate coverage to election campaign news. It is largely through media that people are able to know their leaders and manifestoes of different political parties. This paper aimed at analyzing newspaper coverage relevant to election campaigns. For the purpose, two mainstream English Dailies -The Times of India and The Hindu have been chosen for analysis. The Study explores the press coverage devoted to political parties, candidates contesting the elections and major public issues like corruption, crime, economy, defence or foreign policy etc. during the elections. Moreover, this research shows how news media play a significant role in shaping discourse on public issues.

Keywords: Media, Environment, Politics, News, Content, Coverage.

INTRODUCTION

Media is the barometer to measure the sustainability of human life based on different parameters influencing the lifestyle of the people. Media has power to highlight and expose, it can be used for image makeover or sabotage, can be instrumental in resolving any public priority through regular follow ups that may prompt a higher offices in action, resulting in the resignation or suspension for the culpability. It can also alert the heads of the state against the public rant that may led to the launch of popular public interest reforms. As an anchor of the public interest, the media in many new democracies or older democracies have contributed to public wakefulness, education and reconciliation among diverse social groups, consequently ramming much-needed political and social reforms (Gitlin, T, 2003). The Indian media covered general elections with jovial reporting given its being the imperative source of election information to the people. The dependence of the people on media for latest updates and analysis makes it highly desired and valuable service provider. In the parliamentary elections of 2014 the politics of development was the media rhetoric with almost all the news channels or newspapers were publishing or presenting development

poll planks of the political parties. The politicians from across the party lines put forward the model of development of their respective governments that media reported with passion in tune with news being in demand that moment. If for BJP, it was the development work of Gujarat under the energetic and charismatic leadership of the state CM who was also the Prime Ministerial candidate for the party, Congress highlighted its work in Delhi or Uttarakhand and credited party for its pro poor policies and non-discriminatory governance putting each Indian being at par under constitutional frame. Similarly other smaller and regional political parties also weighed on their developmental work done where being in rule. Thereby different competitive models of governance were put to people to choose and pick to vote parties.

The paper looks at the variety of ways in which the selected media outlets have been examined with reference to different aspects under meticulously reporting for the 2014 general elections campaign to understand the relationship between the democracy, development and public welfare. The paper ends with the findings, suggestions and recommendations that will help create an enabling & encompassing environment

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for the media for the effective and objective purposeful manifestation.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To survey the selected recording units of the data selected for the comparative study of campaign reporting of general elections of 2014 in The Times of India and The Hindu. To compute the items of reference of the 2014 general elections campaign reporting in proportional distribution by The Times of India and The Hindu. To carry out the narration illustrating exploring and explaining about the reporting of 2014 general elections campaign in The Times of India and The Hindu. To scrutinise reporting trends with reference to political parties poll issues and election miscellaneous during 2014 general elections coverage by The Times of India and The Hindu.

METHODOLOGY

The research had applied the method of content analysis to interpret, illustrate and examine the multiple content categories to draw the inferences indicating trends of reporting during the campaign in the general elections of 2014. For this purpose the researcher had taken data from the two mainstream English dailies The Hindu and The Times of India. The Study was undertaken to analyse the coverage of General Elections 2014 by the Indian Media. The data was filtered in specific content categories including political leaders, parties and different public issues covered during the general elections. The issues covered further classified into the categories including crime, corruption, economy, foreign affairs, sectarianism, democracy, defense, health, law and order, environment and agriculture etc. the election related subjects of political news items and political issues categorically studied further to manifest the reporting pattern during the elections. The study aimed at analysing the content to make valid inferences through qualitative as well as quantitative approach. The researcher conducted census study of the selected mainstream dailies for 30 days each from The Hindu and The Times of India. The data has been taken from one week before the start of general elections. Hence the data for the period 1 April 2014 to 30 April 2014 of both of the newspapers were taken for close scrutiny.

Literature Review:

Media impact on elections, political participation and voting behavior has been studied in many countries including United States, UK, Germany and other European and African countries but in India research attention has been focused of late. There have been a few studies on the nature and functions of the media (Fernandez, 2000; Johnson, 2001; Kluver *et al.*, 2007; Prasad, 2006; Sonawalkar, 2001). The available literature on political knowledge focuses on a wide variety of issues like the correlation between reliance on different forms of communication resources and the

corresponding level of political knowledge (Berkowitz & Pritchard, 1989).

The review suggests there are only few studies the area and hence provides adequate opportunity and space to the researcher to carry out this work.

Media and Politics:

A true democracy demands and depends on the independence, neutrality, honesty, fairness, freeness, and openness of both the media as well as elections (Katz, 2011). A free and responsible media is the guarantee in promoting the democratic values and culture in a society. The press with such vital values not only raises political consciousness among public by focusing certain public issues and framing them, but also puts a vigilant check on the electoral system by criticising and discussing the essential issues (Gunther & Mughan, 2000). The media should be a responsible connecting mechanism linking all players including election commission, contestants and electorates regarding the issues of the electoral process. It is essential for the voter to be well informed to form their own opinion freely and make decisions with full knowledge of the facts as an informed citizenry better decide the real or true representatives being in the greatest interest thereof (Mathur, 2013). The media through its functions of information, education, exposition, exploration, mobilisation and surveillance help people make critical political decisions such as why to vote? Whom to vote? What should be the roles and responsibilities of the representatives? How to vote or various related technical procedural aspects of the elections. The media provide a key platform to analyse and judge the candidates on different parameters of suitability, viability and crucial details pertaining to the process of elections hence it attempts to fix the priorities to set the agenda for election campaign (Protest & McCombs, 1991). In scores of cases, the media serve as watchdog or a channel for persuasion and mobilisation of resources, information and masses. Underscoring the impact of media in disseminating information during elections the role of media becomes critical in bringing out the actual public issues in the discourse of debate and consent for making public opinion attempting to shade media lights on core issues impact during elections. It also matters as how media influences the new parameters of social values and standards by which objects of the media attention is judged for mankind betterment (Oates, 2008).

Political Subject Coverage of the Media during the General Elections 2014:

The parliamentary elections 2014 were a big event and a democratic fest celebrated by the Indians and the reporting of the general elections 2014 was a big task for the media as the election news was most desired content for the people. The higher demand for this content further entrusted the media to cater the useful and reliable election information to the people.

The content reporting political subject primarily included the politicians and party, about their comments counter comments, allegations and accusations, strategies, plans and policies, political rivalry and inner party or interparty conflict or clashes etc. The political subject becomes interesting to the viewers and readers as it reflects the outlook, merits and demerits of the leaders, their presentation, orientation and inclination which in turn help voters to decide the candidates among the available options. In the general elections of 2014 political subject was mainly about the congress party and its leaders as the party was in rule for previous ten years and so it was in news for its rule on the different parameters ranging from governance and development at large. The principal opposition party in the parliament Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was in news for its grilling and attacking the ruling congress and development and good governance of its leaders in different states. Apart from BJP and Congress the other smaller regional parties and leaders were also covered for their political stint at regional or central level.

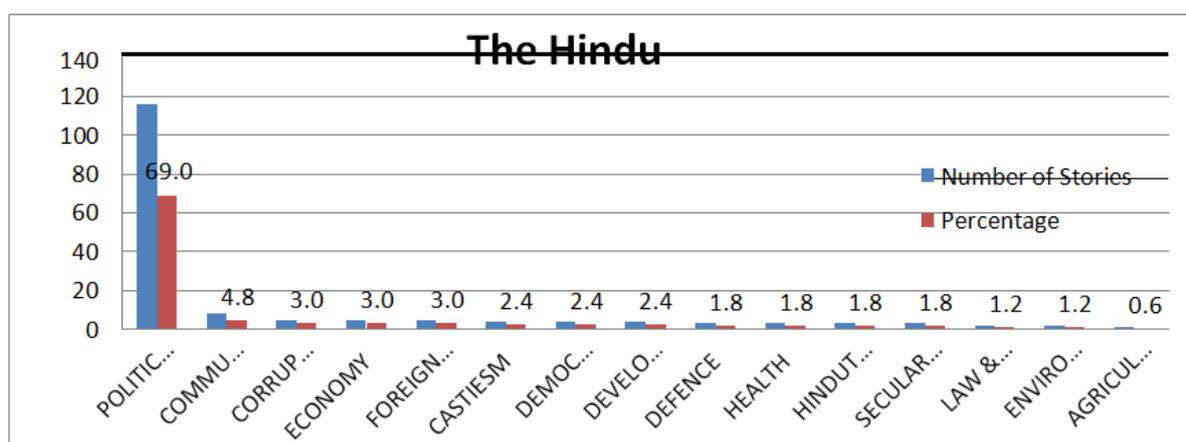
Public Issues and Coverage during General Elections 2014

The 2014 elections were important in many ways particularly its high voltage coverage by mainstream media in order to make public opinion for a competent, effective and accountable government that can serve the public interest to the optimum level. These are the issues such as Health, Environment, Education, Employment, Law and order, Literacy, Poverty, Crime and Corruption etc. which affect the human life cycle either directly or indirectly and act as determinant factor of standard of living. The modern media trends indicate a shift in the reporting pattern particularly in the times of elections where media appears to be more focussed on the political subjects like inter-party political rivalry, mudslinging or slime games of the leaders while ignorance or inadequate coverage to real issues of public concern. A comparative content analysis on the coverage of 2014 general election campaign in two mainstream English

Dailies ‘The Hindu’ and ‘The Times of India’ with specific reference to issues covered can help understand to draw meaningful inferences to this aspect of the study. The two newspapers are among the most reputed media outlets in the print. Both have been in public domain since long as part of mainstream prestige press with substantially increasing coverage, circulation and readership. While The Hindu command huge readership for its highly illustrated Editorials and Articles, The Times of India is popular for capsule and quick information with more attractive visuals.

The Hindu:

The newspaper was established in 1878 as a weekly, The Hindu became a daily in 1889 and then onwards the newspaper had been steadily growing to the increasing circulation nearing 15,58,378 copies a day and a readership of about 22.58 lakhs as recorded by the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) between July- December 2012. Though the newspaper has southern origin, the content produced by the paper is largely balanced, information oriented and in the neutral tone as constructive critic of the establishment of the time. Given to its detailed informative content, the newspapers enjoy special subscription and USP among the student readers preparing for various exams. The least sensational approach of the paper also attracts a vast number of the serious readers, educationists, academicians or intellectuals. The Hindu had a pattern of reporting during the 2014 parliamentary election campaigning period where election news coverage that was more about the political acts, party processions, inter-party rivalry and statements of leaders at the same time leaving issues of public concern comparatively much behind. The content analysis of the paper’s front page and editorial page categorically present how the space was dominated by the news pertaining to the politically charged subjects. The fact that the newspaper is known for its highly balanced reporting along neutral editorial policy yet it was not spared from the high political clout that dominated media sphere during the coverage of general elections of 2014.



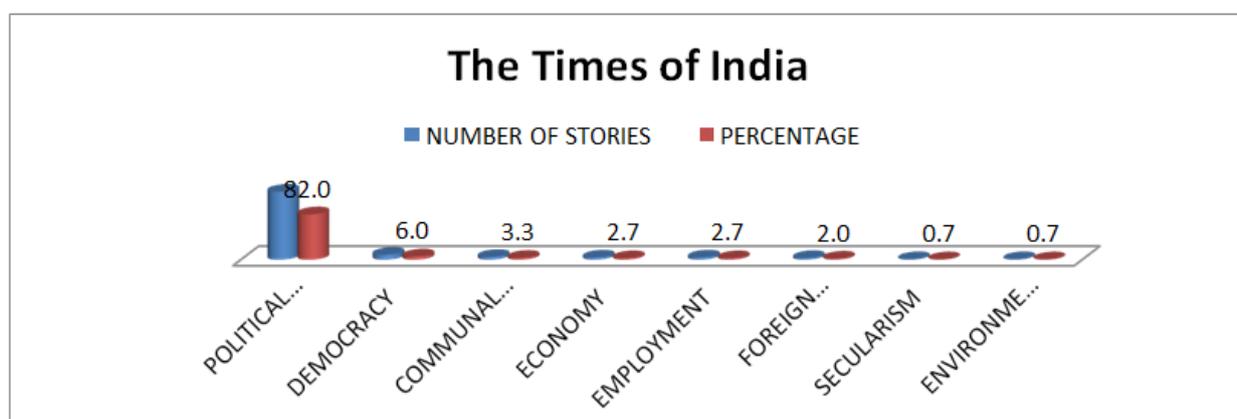
Source: The Hindu, 1st April to 30th April 2014

The data presentations indicated by the above table it is apparent that issues of core interest of the people were subtle to the inter-party tussle and blame games of politicians or their conflictual claims or clashes. Among the issues the communalism dominated the others including agriculture or environment. While social harmony stood at 4.8%, Environment coverage was second to the last with merely 1.2%. Ironically agriculture was last with just 0.6% in a country where agriculture is the prime source of livelihood for over 60% of the total population.

The Times of India:

Since the paper is one of the oldest and most prestigious mainstream newspapers of the India, it enjoys an intact credibility and popularity among its readers. The paper reported the general elections 2014 campaign with immense focus devoting four additional pages along-with front page and Editorial page and rest

of the inside pages excepting sport page and business page. The content analysis of the front page and editorial page reveal that sizable portion of the coverage was devoted to the political subject about the different political affairs of the parties and their leaders while the actual public issues including development, employment, economic growth, health and hygiene, sanitation or education concerning greater public interest were at the edge. A whopping amount of space consisting with over 80% of the content about political subject news left behind with huge margin the content allocated to multiple public issues. Among public issues news pertaining to democracy scored first with just 6%, while news related to communalism 3.3% followed by employment was just at 2.7%, economy at 2.7%, foreign policy at 2.0% and environment content stood last with mere 0.7% of the total news coverage allocated to public issues during the general election campaign of 2014 in The Times of India.



Source: The Times of India, 1st April to 30th April 2014

As demonstrated by the table the newscape of the TOI was mainly concentrated on the political statements of the leaders their other affaires leaving much behind the real issues of the public interest.

CONCLUSION

The priority based media reporting of the social concerns help the people to make an informed decision out of multiple choices and preferences of the political representatives in elections. The problems and issues of the people are key to any election but recent trends of media reporting indicate how media has turned indifferent to these issues while giving more coverage to non issues and sensational political subject during the reporting of election campaigns. The general election 2014 was one of the biggest event in indian history and so it was the centre of reporting for the national as well international mainstream media. The reporting of both the newspapers, The Times of India (TOI) as well as The Hindu apparently demonstrate that how the great and grave public concerns or issues of crime, corruption, health, education, employment, human development or gender discrimination or

violence were preceded by dominant political subject reporting alike blame games and inter-party political barbs and rivalries and political discourse was almost deviated from actual agenda of people. While The Hindu covered political subject slightly lesser than the TOI, it comparatively covered more Public issues than TOI. The Times of India was more focussed on election coverage with its larger space allocation to election news than The Hindu. With the slackness towards the public issues of core concern like agriculture, health or education, Media seem to have compromised its principal duty and deviated from its basic principles. To the interest of general public such a distraction of discourse is threatening trends which may deprive them of their rightful dues reducing them at the mercy of an authoritarian polity having no counter check or accountability. It is the foremost duty of media to facilitate questioning the system on various public issues to provide an space for dissent and pressure group in capacity of the voice of the common people. Media, as janitor of people's rights or a constructive critic, should maintain a balanced approach without any fear or favour to ensure smooth run of a democracy.

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