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ROLE OF MEDIA: NEW COURSE OR
ENTRENCHING OLD PATTERNS?
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by Siegfried O. Wolf

More than two centuries old, the media sector in India is intrinsically tied to the political trajectories of the country.

Even before the country gained independence in 1947, the print media especially, being largely associated with the freedom struggle against the British colonial ruler, turned into a crucial actor in the political arenas of urban India. Quite from the beginning of the country's state and nation-building, the press served as a platform for individuals as well as whole movements to articulate their ideas, protests, and/or demands for social, economic and political improvements. The media earned a high reputation for being a major element of resilience of India's democracy. However, it soon became clear that media might function not only as a transmitter of moderate and constructive betterments but also as a mouthpiece for radical and extreme political thoughts and tendencies. In this respect, the emergence of media in India, like in many other pluralistic societies, was accompanied with growing polarisation and the question which role the media should play in the country's development and decision-making processes. Specially the latter created the challenging puzzle regarding the political and social responsibility journalists are supposed to take on in the light of their vast historical experience, opinion making, and influence on upcoming trends.

Having a history in the freedom struggle and battles over the potential political-administrative set-up and controversies over socio-political arrangements in state and society, it was only natural that media got affected by a high (critical) level of politicisation. Consequently, since its introduction, media turned into a subject of influence from different partisan interests and notions. It is not surprising that such processes are featured through positive (helping to articulate interests and transmit them into the political process) as well as negative (manipulations and other anomalies like paid news, decline in professional accuracy, journalistic ethics and probity) connotations. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that this does not mean an a priori challenge to the freedom of press, understood as a prerequisite for democracy. This matter is gaining significance since it finds its reflection in the character and performance of the media from colonial times until today. The crucial determinant in this matter is how the persistent contestation between self-serving and public service visions of India's media is getting addressed and the interpretation will shape the 'self-identity', perception, and approach of the country's journalists.

In recent times, Indian media has been at the centre of much criticism. Not only the powerful presence of media organisations apparent in the enormous industrial conglomerates in the media sector, certain business practices (like sensational journalism), but also the increasing degree of interlinkages between business interests, medial public opinion shaping, and the political sphere feed critical voices. The apparently extraordinary low level of transparency especially, and the subsequent lack of accountability attached to this phenomenon seem to be an increasing worry. There are claims that experiencing economic profit and political power orientated processes of corporatisation and political affiliation lead to a narrowing-down of pluralistic viewpoints.

Furthermore, an increasing control of the press through businesses and political forces is adding to the burden of perceived heavy political bias and traditional politicisation. Having this in mind, some sections of India's academia and society are even making the argument that the current state of affairs is changing the media from a major pillar into a threat for the fabric of India's democracy.

Interestingly enough, social media being globally praised as a driver for more political participation and 'fresh' democratic impetus, did not turn towards a general appeasement of media critic. Generally one can state that, in most of the countries with developed internet infrastructure, the use of social media is not new and not a sole domain of social and economic entrepreneurs but of political actors too. Here, the use of social media by the political parties and their leaders is a well-known and much used practice for many years, an integral part of the day-to-day routine, and crucial strategic instrument in political campaigns and electoral strategies.

Thanks to the IT revolution, growing literacy rate and subsequent rise of online engagement, social media has finally arrived - with a delay, compared to US and EU - but with a full swing in the political arena in India. With around 243 million internet users and more than 100 million social media users on top of the 392 Television news channels with more than 805 million TV viewers and 90.000 newspapers available for 280 million readers, India's media sector is a tremendous powerful instrument in public opinion making.

Being aware of the significance of media for promoting one's own agenda, the two major political camps, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) led by the Indian National Congress (INC) and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), spearheaded by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), carried out comprehensive media campaigns during the 2014 general elections.

But it was soon observable that the BJP was much more successful in utilising the potential of media, especially social media, as platforms for spreading their political messages. Foremost, BJP's front-runner Narendra Modi was able to engage with the mass of young voters and particularly the 'First-time Voters', which functioned as a crucial 'vote bank', via Facebook, Twitter, YouTube & Co. Instead of relying only on the traditional ways of campaigning and communication, like using Television and print media or carrying out traditional campaign events (like yatras), the full use of social media became an important mantra of Narendra Modi and his BJP. In consequence, Tweets featured the electoral rhetoric of the so called 'digital war rooms' which transformed into the centre of actions for the 'swat-teams' of the BJP campaigners in order to reach out to and attract the electorate. Retrospectively, one can state that almost all politicians and their political parties used some kind of social media during the last general elections. But Modi used social media to such an extraordinary extent that, according to online statistics, he turned out to be one of the most well-known politician world-wide.

In contrast to the BJP, the INC remained largely hampered by their encrusted hierarchical, party-bureaucratic structures and traditional habitus and thus did not benefit from the new spaces for communication offered by social media. Most exemplary in this regard is the case of Rahul Gandhi who refused to use Twitter. To a large and critical extent, the INC top candidate ignored social media as a tool of engagement with the electorate as well as the opportunity to portray himself as a person open for innovations. The protagonists of social media are firmly convinced that this was one (among several other) reasons for his disastrous electoral defeat. This is gaining significance since it seemed that the traditional media also, from broadcasting to print, were a 'reserved domain' of the BJP. In other words, the media coverage of the General Election 2014 had a clear focus on Narendra Modi and his agenda. This raised criticism among several observers leading to a debate on media bias, undue influence of partisan economic and political interests, and ethical standards and professional integrity of the media sector.

The election outcome was not only the result of the success or failure of media campaign in general or the proper reading of contemporary trends in social communications in particular. But I feel this for four reasons which I want to elaborate in the following.

First, the extent of INC failure in the polls is much deeper and can't be explained just with a reference to potential co-opting of media through paid news or influencing editors to gauge public mood to advantage for a certain political camp. Doubtless, such phenomena exist, however, it is not solely responsible for bringing out such a clear electoral decision.

It became rather clear that the voters in general were deeply unsatisfied with the 'old political system' represented by the INC's dominating force, the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty and its political companions. Being involved in numerous corruption scandals (current examples are Commonwealth Games, 2GSpectrum, Coal Allocation, Army Housing, Agusta Kickbacks) and at the same time heavily associated with economic mismanagement as well as social stagnation, people of all classes - poor as well as privileged ones - demanded a change in the political leadership of the country.

Specially India's youth was prone to hearing something positive, foremost a vision which will work towards an improvement of their working and living conditions. Having experienced that the unrealistic promises from the 2004 and 2009 INC/UPA election campaigns were not adequately implemented -like the guarantee of a minimum of a 100 days' work per year in the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), the traditional 'electoral rhetoric of whitewashing' of the country's miserable socio-economic performance under INC/UPA governments were not attracting the electorate (through all socio-economic classes) anymore. Rather it seemed that the voters were desperate for a 'feel good factor' which the BJP already tried to promote and utilise for their own 2004 campaign. At that time, the 'India Shining' campaign of the BJP was unsuccessful in convincing the Indian masses (poor, rural, lower-caste and minority voters) of the general benefits of the economic boom, especially the potential trickle-down effects, under A.T. Vajpayee's BJP/NDA government of 1999-2004. But the argument made here is that 2014 BJP campaign strategists could draw not only on the economic performance of the Gujarat state under Modi's leadership but also on the long term dividends of the Vajpayee government and its mantra of a 'Shining India'. Doubtless, the latter paid off but with a delay in unfolding its effects on the common Indian public.

Second, beside the fact that social media obviously had an overwhelming effect on the election outcome and the way how electoral campaigns got organised, the role of these new online platforms should not be overemphasized. There are little doubts that Modi and his campaign teams undertook tremendous efforts to utilise social media to get in touch with the 'generation online' next to benefitting from the options offered by mainstream media (TV/press). However, he also carried out an extraordinary 'traditional campaign' by organising hundreds of rallies with thousands of public events in 25 states in order to get in touch with the 'unconnected sections' of India's society. This impressive campaign determines definitely an additional factor for Modi's success. Nevertheless, social media users are considered a serious pressure group gaining more and more political influence. Prasar Bharati's Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Dr. Jawhar Sircar, stated in a lecture at the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University, that 160 out of the 543 constituencies were influenced by social media users. In this context, one should be aware of the influence of social media on the processes of 'news making' within the traditional sector. Therefore, social media will function as a catalyst beyond the world wide web (www).

Third, the 2014 election was clearly dominated by the electorate's desire to fill the existing leadership vacuum as well as to bring about political change. Not only the victory of Modi but also the constituencies where the BJP was not voted into power must be considered as a cast for strong leadership. Most remarkable are the eastern and southern states which were dominated by (non-BJP) strong personalities similar to Narendra Modi.

Fourth, in the aftermath of the election, there were also claims made by some BJP critics that the heavy media coverage of Modi and his electoral agenda were limiting the quality of reporting due to the focus on simple slogans. Here, one must sharply differentiate between the potential existence of media bias and the advantage of BJP from the actual quality of media reporting in India. The so called trivialisation of content is not a recent phenomenon, especially not in print media. It is a process which started years ago and finds its expression in the major part of the coverage being devoted to entertainment instead of socio-economic and political issues. This is surely not an Indian trend solely. But what matters is the unbalanced proportion disadvantageous to the quality and quantity of 'societal significance' information like education, health care, unemployment, housing, environment, agriculture, religious fundamentalism etc.

To conclude, the argument that the BJP's success is the outcome of a strategic media campaign by 'manufacturing dissent' against the INC/UPA and portraying the last two governments as a 'waste decade' for India needs to be rejected. Basically, one can state that the role of the media during the 2014 general elections worked in favour of Narendra Modi. However, the fact that media takes sides with partisan interests and their respective political representatives is not an Indian characteristic as one can find the phenomenon of political bias and politicisation of media in many established democracies, too. The cases of the US or Germany exemplarily show that many journalists do not see a threat against freedom of press and opinion or a challenge to their professional ethics if they and their respective media organisations are closely associated with a certain political party. In this context, today's critics of India's media should be further aware that siding with a political party and/or a political ideology is a deeply entrenched and old habit in the country's media sector. The fact that obviously the beneficiary of this phenomenon changed rather marks a continuation of an historical trajectory than a critical juncture which changed the path of India's media sector. Keeping this in mind, the social media should not be understood as a 'game changer' but rather seen as a further development of an already existing trend during the last elections. Therefore, one should be always aware that India's media sector is quite flexible -it seems to be much more than its western counterparts- when it comes to the issue of 'political positioning' and subsequent public opinion making. To sum up, India's 'media bias' was and will remain always in a flux.

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