

MAPPING DIGITAL MEDIA: INDIA



Mapping Digital Media: India

A REPORT BY THE OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

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4. Digital Media and Journalism

4.1 Impact on Journalists and Newsrooms

4.1.1 Journalists

Over the past 5–7 years, the number of news websites and portals in India has increased, but most are extensions of print and television outlets. For varying reasons, including growing audience and revenue pressures, Indian news websites have adopted similar content models, which include non-news content. There are only a few—such as the recently launched Firstpost.com, owned by television conglomerate Network 18 Group—that are focused only on news. Most simply disseminate content produced by sister news companies—such as Moneycontrol.com, the leading business news portal also under the TV18 Group, which owns business news channels in English and Hindi, and/or become avenues to sell other non-news products, as with www.indiatimes.com.

According to Sheela Bhatt, a senior editor at Rediff.com, one of the oldest news portals in India, “Our consistent research tells us what kind of news is read online. And we strive to tailor our content accordingly. For instance, anything to do with the India–Pakistan relationship gets more people to visit our site.”²⁰³

Journalists are under more pressure than ever to find news that has greater audience appeal. Since most audiences for digital news formats (DTH subscribers and web surfers) reside in Indian cities and towns, there is an additional emphasis on, for instance, crimes that affect middle-class citizens. This is often expressed through an emphasis on a breaking news format, which necessitates constant updates of even minor or peripheral developments in a story.

Much content is generated by follow-ups of each other’s stories—print by broadcast media and vice versa—and convergence. For example, there are in some cases formal tie-ups between media groups, such as between *Business Standard* and Rediff.com, where the latter carries pieces and columns published in *Business Standard*. There are also internal ones (e.g. *Times Now* would pursue a story first printed by *The Times of India* and vice versa). Journalists from a group’s print publications act as guest commentators on television channels on significant news days and are encouraged to write blogs, columns, and articles for the group’s website(s).

203. Interview with Sheela Bhatt, senior editor, Rediff.com, New Delhi, April–June 2011.

In the event that a television channel gets an exclusive interview, the sister print products carry extracts. Similarly, if the sister newspaper publishes an investigative piece its follow-up is aggressively pursued by the group's television channel.

Aroon Purie, owner of Living Media Group,²⁰⁴ who shifted the editorial offices of all his news outlets (dailies, weeklies, and television) on to a single floor in a new office in August 2012, and located all the other business, administrative, and circulation departments in the same office building, said of convergence:

What I look forward to is to create a news turbine that will then grow on to multiple platforms. We would hire specialists who are domain experts. They can then generate content across media—whether it is an article or a TV story or an internet one. That is when the business will change. There will be one floor with only 450 journalists (though we have a total of 1,200). There will be far more synergy in the way we generate content, in advertising, in our approach to events. The physical proximity will make that difference.²⁰⁵

Nikhil Pahwa, founder of Medianama.com, which specializes in reporting on and analysing trends in digital media, says digitization has enabled journalists to radically expand their base of information sources:

Earlier, our sources were restricted to select politicians, government officials, senior corporate managers, renowned intellectuals and civil society (including NGOs). Today, they could be one of the hundreds of thousands of visitors on my site, or his/her friends and acquaintances ... Of course, we have to check and cross-check the information before putting it up on our website.²⁰⁶

In the case of television channels, the trend toward citizen journalism—itsself facilitated by cheap digital gadgets—has expanded news sources and reporting styles. Today, several news channels have slots dedicated to citizen journalists. Even news websites encourage this.

4.1.2 Ethics

Since breaking news has become the norm for news channels and websites, journalists tend to get more embedded with fewer sources. As reporters must update breaking news for the next bulletin, they must be close to source(s), and this can compromise independence and integrity.

News outlets like to show they connect well with their audiences and show that their content is appreciated. In some cases, this has resulted in the invention of letters from readers. “We generally get staffers and friends to either comment online or through tweets on content to make our seniors feel happy,” admitted a

204. One of the largest diversified media entities with a daily tabloid (*Mail Today*), a weekly news magazine (*India Today* in several languages), three news channels (Aaj Tak, Headlines Today, and Delhi Aaj Tak), FM radio stations, and a news website (Intoday.com).

205. Quoted in V. Kohli-Khandekar, “We should have got into newspapers earlier,” *Business Standard*, May 2011.

206. Interview with Nikhil Pahwa, founder and editor, MediaNama, New Delhi, April–June 2011.

news channel journalist. In December 2010, *The Hindu* reported about an ethical breach that involved the English news channel CNN-IBN and the tweets it aired for a prime-time program on “should lobbying be legalized?”²⁰⁷ Later, the channel apologized to its viewers on its website.

There is pressure on news organizations to run with the news without even the elementary diligence and/or confirmation, largely because of the speed prompted by digitization and increased competition. In September 2008, *Times Now* ran a story about a provident fund scam involving judges and wrongly included the photograph of a nationally well-known judge, who had nothing to do with it—an incident that the senior manager of the channel is quoted to have attributed to “the obsession with speed.”²⁰⁸ Though *Times Now* aired a correction, albeit 15 days later, and an apology two days subsequently, the dissatisfied judge filed a suit in a local court.²⁰⁹

The lack of diligence in the digital media is also evident from the controversial “Radiatapes,” which comprised numerous telephone conversations that Niira Radia, an independent lobbyist handling PR and government liaison for leading business groups such as Tata and Mukesh Ambani, had with dozens of renowned television and print journalists, politicians, bureaucrats, and other lobbyists. A few of these conversations were with Ms Dutt, Group Editor at NDTV, and Vir Sanghvi, then Editorial Director of the *Hindustan Times*, who was subsequently re-designated as Advisor. Dutt came across as a journalist who seemed to be acting as a “messenger” for discussions on the selection of cabinet ministers between two of the ruling coalition partners just after the national elections in May 2009. Mr Sanghvi, in contrast, discussed details of his forthcoming column(s) with Radia in a bid to convince her that the contents were spun in favor of one of her clients, Mukesh Ambani.²¹⁰

Although the print magazines *Outlook* and *Open* took credit for exposing the Radiatapes, they published the contents without authenticating them to find out if the tapes had been tampered with. The people whose conversations were reproduced were not contacted for clarifications. *Outlook* put up the audio recordings on its website. Much later, Mr Sanghvi said that his conversations were “doctored;”²¹¹ even the government argued in the Supreme Court that the tapes were tampered with.²¹² The Supreme has still not given a judgment.

207. Priscilla Jebaraj, “Fake tweets aired on TV news show,” *The Hindu*, 19 December 2010, at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article961539.ece> (accessed 10 June 2011).

208. Rahul Bhatia, “Fast and Furious,” *Caravan*, 1 December 2012, at <http://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/fast-and-furious> (accessed 12 December 2012).

209. While this local court awarded him Rs 1 billion in damages in April 2009, *Times Now* appealed in the Bombay High Court; the latter, admitting the case, asked the broadcaster to deposit Rs 200 million and furnish bank guarantees for the remaining Rs 800 million; “Deposit Rs 20 cr, HC tells Times Now in Sawant suit,” *Indian Express*, 29 September 2011, at <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/deposit-rs-20-cr-hc-tells-times-now-in-sawant-suit/853339> (accessed 12 December 2012).

210. Ms Dutt and Mr Sanghvi later clarified that they were merely stringing along Ms Radia.

211. Vir Sanghvi, “Radia Tapes Weren’t Authentic, They Were Manipulated,” *Outlook*, 7 November 2011, at <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?278785> (accessed 13 Jan 2013).

212. “Radia tapes tampered with: Govt to SC,” *sify news*, 31 January 2012, at <http://www.sify.com/news/radia-tapes-tampered-with-govt-to-sc-news-national-mb5sHRaajbe.html> (accessed 13 January 2013).

Even in cases of normal news stories, journalists tend to go with information, even if unsubstantiated, unconfirmed, or from a single source. A Chief of Bureau of a leading English news channel said: “This was the case when television channels recently reported that the chopper carrying the Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister, which lost radar contact, had landed safely. The truth was that the chopper was lost and, later, it was found to have crashed. But we went ahead with the ‘safe landing’ information without cross-checking it as we wanted to be the first to carry it and it came from the chief minister’s personal aide.”²¹³

Invasion of privacy and other ethical issues involved have become crucial in the case of sting operations, easily enabled by technology (see more on this in section 4.2 below). The courts have wavered in their attitude toward stings: while during a Supreme Court hearing in August 2008 a judge defended stings, in another case in the same court an unconditional apology was sought from a television reporter.²¹⁴ Some stings by various news channels have gone horribly wrong.²¹⁵ Journalists have been caught blackmailing individuals after conducting a sting on them; factually incorrect or half-baked pieces have been filed by sting operators. The government and the judiciary have debated ways and means to monitor and control stings, forcing media to opt for self-regulation.²¹⁶

In October 2012, a reverse sting surfaced when Jindal Steel and Power Ltd (JSPL), a leading company in the country, filed a FIR (First Information Report) with the Delhi Police. The FIR alleged that two senior executives of Zee Group, which owns over 15 entertainment and news channels, had demanded Rs 1 billion to stop the telecast of adverse news against JSPL. Along with the FIR, which also named Zee’s chairman and his son as co-accused, JSPL gave the police the audio and video recordings of several telephone conversations and meetings held between Zee and JSPL executives. Subsequently, these two executives, one each from the editorial and managerial division of Zee, were arrested but released later on bail. Zee claimed that JSPL had offered the money as bribes to slow down the media group’s exposé of JSPL’s involvement in a huge scam.²¹⁷

213. For details of this April 2011 accident, see “Dorjee Khandu’s body, copter wreckage found,” *The Hindu*, 4 May 2011, at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/dorjee-khandus-body-copter-wreckage-found/article1990594.ece> (accessed 13 December 2012).

214. During the Supreme Court hearing of a sting operation against a former Union Minister, Justice Markandey Katju (now chairman of the PCI) remarked: “I totally agree with sting operations ... Corrupt elements can be brought to light by these sort of operations.” In contrast, another SC bench headed by Chief Justice of India K.G. Balakrishnan has insisted on an “unconditional apology” from a TV reporter who exposed corruption in subordinate courts in Gujarat through a sting operation, at <http://news.vakilno1.com/tag/tv-sting-operation> (accessed 13 December 2012).

215. Law Commission of India, “A consultation paper-cum-questionnaire on undercover/sting operations,” 2010, at <http://lawcommissionofindia.nic.in/stingoperation.doc> (accessed January 2012).

216. News Broadcasters Association, “Code of ethics and broadcasting standards,” 2008, at http://www.nbanewdelhi.com/pdf/final/NBA_code-of-ethics_english.pdf (accessed January 2012).

217. CNN-IBN, “Jindal extortion case: Court denies bail to arrested Zee editors,” *IBN Live*, 3 December 2012, at <http://content.ibnlive.in.com/article/03-Dec-2012politics/jindal-extortion-case-court-denies-bail-to-zee-editors-308666-37.html> (accessed 8 December 2012); Archana Shukla, “With FIR, Jindal gives police tapes of ‘meetings’ with Zee,” *Indian Express*, 12 October 2012, at <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/with-fir-jindal-gives-police-tapes-of-meetings-with-zee/1015622> (accessed 8 December 2012).

4.2 Investigative Journalism

4.2.1 Opportunities

There are several ways in which digitization has helped investigative journalism. Today, investigative reporters have access to a plethora of online resources (e.g. corporate and regulatory documents). Tracing people has become easier because of online directories. Thanks to digitization, whistle blowers (whether within the government, corporate set-ups, or civil society) have more access to journalistic outlets since they can copy information and distribute it via email.

To begin with, information, especially that related to business issues such as the annual figures of companies collected by the Registrar of Companies (RoC), is available online, along with disclosures that listed companies have to make to the stock exchanges. Digitization of libraries, as well as content generated by others, allows journalists ready access to information. Locating key sources has also become easy.

Some of the best investigative pieces originating from regular reports on listed companies have helped the media to expose irregularities. These included Biocon Ltd, a leading biotech firm, which failed to reflect certain losses in its profit and loss account, and HDFC Bank Ltd, a leading private bank, alleged to have inflated its earnings. Both maintained they had used standard accounting practices.²¹⁸

Digital tools have given a fillip to stings. Although such recordings may not be admissible in court, they provide the moral high ground for the media to pursue issues of corruption and crony capitalism. One of the earliest stings was carried out by Tehelka.com, which exposed the nexus between arms lobbyists and Indian defense personnel to influence purchases by the Indian army.²¹⁹

Since then, there have been several successful stings, conducted both by staff journalists and independent sting specialists (such as Cobrapost.com), which team up with news channels. The latest exposed how MPs take money to ask questions in parliament to further corporate or other interests.

“A sting requires knowledge about both journalistic techniques and the limitations of technology tools. One has to be a geek and a hack,” said a sting reporter who previously worked for Cobrapost.com. Aniruddha Bahl, journalist and founder of the website, felt that although technology has enhanced the viability of independent sting operations, it has not led to their mushrooming because stings require several unique journalistic skills.²²⁰

218. Suresh Nandi, “Analysts bashing Indian cos on accounting habits,” *Deccan Herald*, 24 June 2012, at www.deccanherald.com/content/259319/analysts-bashing-indian-cos-accounting.html (accessed 4 August 2012).

219. Madhu Trehan, *Tehelka as Metaphor*, Roli Books, New Delhi, 2009.

220. Interview with Aniruddha Bahl, founder, Cobrapost.com, New Delhi, November 2011.

In the past year or so, the best investigative pieces were broken by the print media. But *Outlook* Editor Krishna Prasad, an active blogger, says they tend to fall into the trap of what might be called “document and/or CD-based” investigations. “A journalist gets a piece of ‘secret’ paper—a letter, part of a report, or a confidential memo—or an unsubstantiated CD and runs with the story. There is no effort to authenticate the information, gauge its macro implications, and do reporting around it to make the story more credible,” he explained.²²¹

Even though access to information has become easier, few journalists have been trained or take the time to wade through the enormous amount of data available online. The science of how to use public records, taught in journalism schools in developed nations, is not much pursued in India, where investigative reporters rely more on accessing “secret and confidential” documents from their sources. They also use the Right to Information Act for pieces on the inner functioning of the government.

4.2.2 Threats

Since digitization has forced the pace of news flow, mistakes can prove costly. In November 2011, *Times Now* was fined Rs1 billion (US\$17 million) after it inadvertently flashed the photograph of a retired judge, whose name was similar to that of the real culprit behind a pensions-related scam.²²²

Many media have found themselves in a difficult position because several sting operations, both internal and outsourced, have gone terribly wrong. The Supreme Court took cognizance of the trend in “wrong” stings and criticized the media; news channels decided not to air such operations, unless they were conducted by in-house editorial staff (though outsourced stings have made a comeback). In 2010, Aniruddha Bahl, the main reporter during *Tehelka.com*’s Defense Ministry sting and who later launched *Cobrapost.com*, said independent stings had come to a standstill. While the government talked about regulations against stings, the media proposed self-regulation to control its negative effects.

Even when such journalism has gone right, there have been instances when external pressure has forced outlets to take stories offline. Sheela Bhatt of *Rediff.com* notes similar pressures to remove stories from websites and even news channels when they involve criticism of certain corporate or political interests. “Since digitization allows content to be immediately uploaded as well as removed, controversial pieces invariably witness direct and indirect pressures to do the latter,” she said.²²³

Both the judiciary and legislature have sought to initiate new guidelines for reporting. In March 2012, the Supreme Court set up a Constitutional Bench of five judges to frame guidelines for reportage of the

221. Interview with Krishna Prasad, Editor, *Outlook*, New Delhi, April–June 2011.

222. “SC asks Times Now to deposit Rs 100 crore before HC takes up its appeal in defamation case,” Times News Network, 15 November 2011, at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/SC-asks-Times-Now-to-deposit-Rs-100-crore-before-HC-takes-up-its-appeal-in-defamation-case/article-show/10734614.cms> (accessed December 2011).

223. Interview with Sheela Bhatt, Senior Editor, *Rediff.com*, New Delhi, April–June 2011.

various court proceedings.²²⁴ Although the rules have not been finalized, they may include provisions such as requiring a journalist covering the courts to have a law degree, and any judge in any case can deem the case to be “sensitive” and, hence, out of bounds of media coverage. In April 2012, parliament finalized norms on how to report on the meetings of its Standing Committees and Joint Committees. While parliamentary officials specified that journalists cannot write about Standing Committee reports unless the chairman of the specific committee has publicly disclosed the contents, they also maintained that journalists would not be “allowed in the vicinity of ... [the committees’] meetings.”²²⁵

4.2.3 New Platforms

Often when journalists find it difficult to get stories into their newspapers, they turn to independent blogs. Girish Nikam, a journalist-cum-blogger, was among the first to put up the Radia papers, which purported to contain transcripts and/or details of the conversations that the lobbyist Niira Radia had with politicians and journalists on his website (Indiareport.com) before it was reported by mainstream media. Subsequently, the actual audio conversations were leaked to the media in the form of recordings on a CD. Rashmi Bansal was among the first to investigate the operations of a business school, the Indian Institute of Planning and Management (IIPM), through her blogs (Youthcurry.blogspot.com) and print publication (*JAM*).

Although still limited, some print and television journalists have started blogs on their organizations’ websites. A few have personalized, separate blogs, such as Mr Prasad, who runs Churumuri.wordpress.com. He states: “The blogs are quite different from what we write in print or air on news channels. This is because blogs can generally be longer as there are no space constraints, are irreverent as their readership comprises younger people, have the flexibility to include hyperlinks, audios and videos because of technology, and talk about issues that might be considered sensitive by organizations vis-a-vis other media products (print, television, and websites).”²²⁶

Adds Shishuraj Yadav, freelance journalist and active blogger: “Newspaper editors follow and publish blogs written by senior, retired and renowned journalists. For example, the blogs of Punya Prasad Bajpai (Prasunbajpai-en.itzmyblog.com), who works at Zee News, are published in several Hindi newspapers, such as *Dainik Jagran*, *Dainik Bhaskar*, and *Hindustan*.”²²⁷ Panini Anand, another freelance journalist, cites examples of blogs that highlighted controversial issues: “Even before *The Hindu* (and other mainstream media) reported on the 2G telecom scam, Girish Nikam wrote about it in his blog (Indiareport.com).²²⁸ The video on Facebook showing border security force soldiers torturing a young man went viral on YouTube and

224. Nikhil Kanekal, “Supreme Court to frame guidelines for media coverage of proceedings,” Livemint.com, 13 March 2012, at <http://www.livemint.com/2012/03/13231725/Supreme-Court-to-frame-guideli.html> (accessed 24 July 2012).

225. Anuradha Raman, “Warding Off The Eye: The judiciary and Parliament seem to think they could do with less coverage,” *Outlook*, 23 April 2012, at <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?280565> (accessed 24 July 2012).

226. Interview with Krishna Prasad, Editor, *Outlook*, New Delhi, November 2011.

227. Interview with Shishuraj Yadav, freelance journalist and active blogger, New Delhi, February 2012.

228. Girish Nikam, “Why did the 2G scam occur right under Manmohan Singh’s nose: PM—Raja letters—Text and the context,” *Indiareport.com*, 9 December 2010, at <http://indiasreport.com/magazine/data/why-did-the-2g-scam-occur-right-under-manmohan-singh-percentE2-percent80-percent99s-nose-pm-percentE2-percent80-percent94raja-letters-percentE2-percent80-percent94text-and-the-context/> (accessed 10 December 2011).

was later picked up by media houses.²²⁹ Similarly, the Forbesganj incident,²³⁰ in which police killed six people in Bihar ... these videos were on YouTube and not in the mainstream media.”²³¹

In contrast, most news channels and websites do not have the time, budgets, and/or the mindset to chase long-term investigative stories. They tend to outsource them, especially stings, to organizations such as Cobrapost.com or senior freelance journalists. One major reason is cost. Pieces can be purchased from outside agencies on an exclusive basis for a third of what it would cost internally. “Apart from reasons of economics, there is a feeling among media organizations that the talent pool for investigative journalism has shrunk. Therefore, it is critical to tap into independent agencies/individuals, which have a proven track record,” said Pranjali Sharma, a former senior editor with Bloomberg India.²³²

Citizen journalism has—as elsewhere in the world—become another common form of outsourcing. In such forms, someone who happens to be at the scene of an incident, or who has a scandal to expose, uses amateur video recorders (mobile phone or video camera) and gives the recording to news channels or websites. Media, while able to expand the scope of their coverage, justify this practice as a form of greater interactivity between themselves and the viewer or reader.

4.2.4 Dissemination and Impact

Saikat Datta, an investigative reporter then with *Outlook* weekly, gave examples of two news stories of similar importance yet with different outcomes. In one case, digitization amplified the story, which had national ramifications; in the other, the story had a short-term life and faced an untimely death. Starting in 2005, Datta²³³ wrote a series of articles on the Rs 190 billion (US\$3.4 billion) submarine deal, in which it was alleged bribes were paid. There was little fall-out from the stories.

By contrast, press reports started appearing in late 2008 on the 2G telecoms scam in which a former telecoms minister allegedly undercharged operators for licenses²³⁴ (see section 5.1.2). This soon led to the resignation and arrest of the minister and other high-profile politicians and company managers. While the 2G scam was amplified by television news channels and social media networks, the submarine stories got little extra attention through such means. For this reason, SMS and UGC sites seem to have become the preferred means to disseminate, especially investigative, content to ensure immediate attention and larger viewership/readership. Leading television anchors such as Arnab Goswami of *Times Now* and Ms Dutt of NDTV 24x7 are able to further leverage attention for their daily programs through their over 100,000 followers on Twitter.

229. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMg8FFjcNx0> (accessed 25 February 2012).

230. Gopal Krishna, “Bihar Police Kills Woman & Child in Forbesganj, Araria,” [biharwatch.blogspot.in](http://biharwatch.blogspot.in/2011/06/bihar-police-kills-woman-child-in.html), 9 June 2011, at <http://biharwatch.blogspot.in/2011/06/bihar-police-kills-woman-child-in.html> (accessed 10 December 2011).

231. Interview with Panini Anand, Editor, Pratirodh.com, New Delhi, February 2012.

232. Interview with Pranajal Sharma, former Senior Editor, Bloomberg India, Mumbai/New Delhi, December 2011.

233. Interview with Saikat Datta, Bureau Chief, *DNA*, New Delhi, April–June 2011.

234. For an administrative chronology of the 2G scam, see the “Report of the Comptroller Auditor General of India,” p. 25, at http://www.cag.gov.in/html/reports/civil/2010-11_19PA/chap4.pdf (accessed 23 May 2012) (hereafter CAG Report).

4.3 Social and Cultural Diversity

4.3.1 Sensitive Issues

Sensitive issues in India generally fall into three broad categories. The first are those related to territorial, religious, and ethnic divisions or disputes: with Pakistan over Kashmir; with China over parts of Arunachal Pradesh; clashes between communities, especially in north-eastern states (Nagaland and Manipur); tensions between Hindus and Muslims; sub-regional agitations (e.g. the Telengana movement in Andhra Pradesh); and the Maoist movement in the entire eastern-coastal belt.

The second category concerns entrenched social biases, especially those based on caste, gender, and sexual orientations. Despite the spectacular rise of lower castes, prejudice, discrimination, and exploitation relating to them are still prevalent. Similarly, women have gained social and economic independence, but abuse of and violence against them is still prevalent. Gays, lesbians, and those in extra-marital relationships still suffer widespread abuse too. Ammu Joseph, journalist and founder member of the Network of Women in Media, says: “I’d say the seven dailies making up the English press in Bangalore have been increasingly open to reporting on issues concerning sexual minorities, crimes against women, other human rights abuses, moral policing, etc. However, there are still problems with the coverage—chiefly in terms of selectivity, superficiality, and, to some extent, sensationalism.”²³⁵

Affirmative action for government jobs and higher education introduced in the late 1980s is part of the wider issue of discrimination concerning religious (particularly Muslim and Christian), ethnic, and caste minorities. It is these minorities which have benefitted from quotas, opposed by some sections of civil society and the media, which argue differentiation according to religion is unconstitutional.

The third category relates to natural resources. Government and business efforts to acquire land have played a part in India’s rapid economic growth. There have been frequent reports on various levels of government and the private sector colluding to buy farmland with inadequate compensation. Similarly, in the case of mining projects, especially in tribal areas, those with power have exploited or negated the rights of local communities.

All four pillars of Indian democracy—legislature, executive, judiciary, and the media—have made attempts to regulate the coverage of some of these issues. In 2005, the government proposed new broadcasting legislation, which included clauses to set up a separate programming code and independent regulator to monitor news content. However, the bill has been put in cold storage. Meanwhile the government, while maintaining that it is against censorship on the web, has put pressure on websites (Google, YouTube) and social networks (Facebook, Orkut) to monitor and remove content seen as anti-national or anti-religious.²³⁶ One example is the Home Ministry’s decision to ask 310 websites to remove “malicious” content in the wake of the targeting

235. Interview with Ammu Joseph, journalist and author, founder member of Network of Women in Media, Bangalore, February 2012.

236. Debarshi Dasgupta, “Status Update? Bad,” *Outlook*, 19 December 2011, at <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?279280> (accessed 8 December 2012).

of people from the north-eastern states in some southern cities. It asked Twitter to remove pages and ban 16 accounts, including some fakes representing the Prime Minister,²³⁷ and banned bulk SMS and MMS for 15 days in a bid to stop the spreading of rumors against the north-eastern communities.²³⁸ Twitter and the websites complied with the government's order. In some cases, the government has blocked websites. In February 2012, it blocked the UK-based Sharia4hind.com, which announced a march in New Delhi to put pressure on India to adopt Islamic Sharia laws.

The executive has taken action against a few individuals, whose "seditious" speeches or statements have been reported by the media. The police charged the writer Arundhati Roy for saying at a seminar in New York in October 2010 that "Kashmir has never been an integral part of India" and "India needs *azaadi* (freedom) from Kashmir just as much as Kashmir needs *azaadi* from India."²³⁹ Almost a year after the New Delhi police filed an FIR against her, it told the New Delhi High Court that it had yet to complete its probe. The case still goes on.²⁴⁰

4.3.2 Coverage of Sensitive Issues

Reportage on social diversity is changing. The slew of regional and sub-regional television channels and digital platforms concentrate more on local issues as their audiences are well spread out across, but often limited to, the concerned state or region. Writing on the agitation for a separate Telangana state in Andhra Pradesh in 2009, Madabhushi Sridhar, Professor of Law at NALSAR, found:

The agitation for the separation of Telangana from Andhra Pradesh (formed in 1956) has not been as serious as it was in 1969. However, what has made a major difference in 2009 has been the presence of a vibrant media in terms of its coverage. Because, in 1969, 90 percent of the print media was in the hands of non-Telangana owners, the coverage of the agitation was either absent or less hostile even when frequent police firings killed 370 people. Now, after 40 years, one can see a quantum increase in the size, number, and reach of the print media. Also added are nine 24-hour news channels, giving minute and repeated coverage of each and every immolation, suicide (reportedly 40 deaths), statement, *dharna*, effigy-burning, and bus-damaging incident, both in close-up and slow motion.²⁴¹

237. Amitabh Sinha, "No Assam mention in most blocked sites," *Indian Express*, 22 August 2012, at <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/no-assam-mention-in-most-blocked-sites/991360/> (accessed 8 December 2012).

238. Vibodh Parthasarathi and Arshad Amanullah, "Silencing SMS: The anatomy of 'mCurfew' in India," at <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/indiaatlse/2012/10/10/silencing-sms-the-anatomy-of-mcurfew-in-india> (accessed 8 December 2012).

239. "Azaadi" translates as "independence:" transcript of Arundhati Roy's speech at a seminar, at <http://leftyprof.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/transcript-of-arundhati-roy-seditious-speech.pdf> (accessed 8 December 2012).

240. Press Trust of India (PTI), "Still probing sedition case against Geelani, Roy: Police," *Greater Kashmir*, 5 July 2011, at <http://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/2011/Jul/5/still-probing-sedition-case-against-geelani-roy-police-46.asp> (accessed 22 July 2012).

241. Madabhushi Sridhar, "Relentless coverage fanned Telangana flames," at <http://indiacurrentaffairs.org/relentless-coverage-fanned-telangana-flames-percent2percent80percent93-prof-madabhushi-sridhar/> (accessed 28 November 2011).

Ajay Upadhyaya, a Hindi journalist with several decades of experience, says:

In terms of diversity, the regional media (news channels and language or local websites) tend to be more broad-based and inclusive than the national one. Responding to more fragmented and localized communities, the regional journalists are definitely more sensitive to the social issues. But, at the same time, this can become counter-productive as they try to impose the emotions and feelings of the local (and majority) community in a bid to grab viewers/readers. This can, and has, resulted in over-biased and one-sided reporting, especially on caste and class issues.²⁴²

4.3.3 Space for Public Expression

Digital media have spawned new platforms and outlets incorporating varying, contradictory, and diverse views on social issues, especially conflicts (e.g. on the Kashmir issue journalists can educate themselves through websites and Facebook links giving all perspectives).²⁴³

Digitization has also enabled other minority groups to voice their concerns and try to influence policies and perceptions. Over two decades ago, Ashok Row Kavi, a renowned gay rights activist, launched the first registered magazine on LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) issues. Suspended in 2002, it recently re-launched and has a huge web presence (Bombaydost.co.in).

Dalits have found a new voice through the net. Chandra Bhan Prasad, a self-trained social anthropologist and psychologist, has raised issues related to Dalits through his writings in media, television interviews, and his website, Chandrabhanprasad.com. He also has a blog on Ambedkar.org, a website that covers news, analysis, views, and research papers related to Dalits.

However, whether digitization has contributed to a greater awareness of social and cultural diversity is far from conclusive: some studies point to the opposite conclusion, arguing certain conflicts are either not covered, or are covered less due—at least in part—to their perceived low viewership. This, they contend, is true of the reportage of the north-eastern states in the mainstream media. “One of the reasons for this glaring absence is that the cities and towns of the region do not come under TRP (television rating point) towns. Audiences therefore are numerically insignificant against the mass viewership in major Indian cities to which sponsorship is wedded,” says a short study conducted in 2004.²⁴⁴ This is buttressed by a recent study on media coverage of north-east India.

242. Interview with Ajay Upadhyaya, Editor, *Amar Ujala*, New Delhi, November 2011.

243. For instance, see <http://www.tejindersodhi.com/2011/07/militants-use-social-networking-sites.html>; http://www.insightonconflict.org/about;http://www.ukpnp.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=57_percent3Awho-are-the-kashmir-militants&Itemid=18; <http://www.jkth.org/Details/leadership/Chairman.html> (all accessed 2 December 2012).

244. Daisy Hasan, “Out of the box: Televisual representations of north-east India,” *Sarai Reader 2004: Crisis/Media*, at <http://www.sarai.net/publications/readers/04-crisis-media/16daisy.pdf> (accessed 8 December 2012). The study concluded that, “Any meaningful representation of the region will have to approach it from a perspective other than the one of insurgency and backwardness that informs current coverage. Unless spaces for the expression of contemporary cultural interests and political aspirations are created, the North-East, in spite of all its ‘crises’ that attract television coverage, might in a real sense remain out of the box.”

India's Northeast still remains trapped behind a veil of selective silence for the rest of the country and the outside world. The engagement of the mainstream Indian private media—both print and broadcast—with the Northeast remains marginal ... The result of this disengagement is that voices from the Northeast find very little space in newspapers and even less air-time in privately owned television news channels that are printed or aired out of metropolitan centres ... And often, the coverage of the Northeast remains trapped in stereotypes ... In metropolitan India, the dominant image of the Northeast still remains that of a wild frontier.²⁴⁵

Similarly, most activists and many journalists have often observed that reporting on rural issues is inadequate. A survey of leading English and regional dailies from the north, south, east, west, and central regions of India in late 2010 revealed only 3.1 percent of all news had a rural focus; agricultural news accounted for only 0.9 percent. Moreover, Bengali papers had the highest focus on rural news, with 11.5 percent in *Ananda Bazar Patrika* and 6.9 percent in *Telegraph*, albeit much of this in West Bengal (where these papers are published) was on news of political violence originating from the rural areas.²⁴⁶ Other surveys have validated the trend of abysmally low emphasis on rural issues. A study by the journalist Vipul Mudgal in August 2011 found the three highest circulated English and Hindi dailies devoting only 2 percent of their total coverage to rural issues, crises, and anxieties. Importantly:

Even this low count could be misleading because most rural news is not about the farmers/villagers or about their concerns related to land, livestock, resources, or farming. A content analysis of 968 news items shows 36 percent of the coverage goes to issues of violence, accidents, crime or disasters. Less than 28 percent is about agrarian themes while 15 percent is about hunger, suicides, malnutrition, distress migration, displacements, or farmers' movements.²⁴⁷

4.4 Political Diversity

4.4.1 Elections and Political Coverage

There are three clear aspects in which digitization has influenced the regulation of elections in the past eight years. These relate to opinion polls (specifically exit polls) during elections, the airtime of reportage given to political parties by media organizations, and the phenomenon of “paid news.” For all three, the EC sought to eliminate bias in favor of any party.

245. Arijit Sen, “Marginal on the Map: Hidden Wars and Hidden Media in Northeast India,” Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper, University of Oxford, 2011, at https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Publications/fellows_papers/2010-2011/Marginal_on_the_map_Hidden_wars_and_hidden_media_in_northeast_India.pdf (accessed 8 December 2012).

246. “What Makes News: A Content Study of Regional Media,” Thehoot.org, 2011 (accessed 2 December 2012).

247. Vipul Mudgal, “Rural Coverage in the Hindi and English Dailies,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 46(35) (27 August 2011), pp. 92–97.

Elections in India are held in phases because of the size of the country and some of its larger states. Leading news outlets together with private survey/polling agencies hold exit polls after each phase to provide trends in voting patterns. Results get incrementally circulated—i.e. beyond the audience of the commissioning media—on other/independent websites, or are shared via social media or SMS.

The EC and psephologists felt that this could—and did—influence voting patterns in subsequent phases. So in 2008–2009 the EC ruled that while exit polls could be conducted by the media in conjunction with poll survey agencies, their results could only be announced, telecast, or reported after all the phases of voting were completed. The EC’s code of conduct also says that “transmitting objectionable messages on SMSs during election is prohibited,” and provides a forwarding number so that the police can investigate.²⁴⁸

The EC also restricts the allocation of airtime to political parties. If it receives a complaint about bias, it can force a media outlet to provide specific details about the time and/or space it allocated and insist on remedial action. Similarly, during the 48-hour period after campaigning ends and voting begins, electronic (but not print) media outlets are not permitted to telecast stories that endorse a certain candidate or political party, either locally, regionally, or nationally.²⁴⁹

Politicians have sought to use paid news in print products to get around some EC restrictions. In a note to the PCI, the EC observed:

Of late, the campaign using the media (especially print media) has taken a more disturbing turn. There have been several complaints of surrogate advertisements or “paid news” appearing in the form of news items. On the face of it, such advertisements give an impression of a genuine news report covering the election campaign of a particular candidate. But when such reports repeatedly appear in that newspaper more or less on a regular basis, the matter does give rise to a doubt or suspicion whether the reports are “honest” coverage of the election campaign of the candidate as innocent news item.²⁵⁰

There is nothing in the PCI’s code of conduct aimed at separating editorial content and advertising, and the PCI has not taken steps to introduce any change to the code in this regard. The EC, meanwhile, has tried to bring surrogate advertisements and/or paid news in print media within its ambit of monitoring. In the recent past, the EC has tried to check and control the menace of paid news during elections. For instance, during

248. Election Commission of India, “Model code of conduct for the guidance of political parties and candidates,” Election Commission of India, New Delhi, 2007, Question 89, p. 33, at http://eci.nic.in/eci_main/faq/faq_mcc.pdf (accessed 28 November 2011) (hereafter Election Commission of India, 2007).

249. Election Commission, 2007.

250. PCI, “Paid News: How corruption in the Indian media undermines democracy,” PCI Sub-Committee Report, 2011, at <http://presscouncil.nic.in/Sub-CommitteeReport.pdf>, 19 September 2011 (accessed 28 November 2011). This Report was not accepted by the Council and was only relied upon, *inter alia*, for information for drawing up the Final Report. It was only in September 2011 that the Report was made public on the internet in compliance with an order of the Central Information Commission.

the assembly elections in Gujarat in December 2012, the EC issued guidelines well in advance to pinpoint and handle such cases.²⁵¹

So, how have these regulatory protocols affected the diversity of political voices?

At one level, balanced airtime in electronic media has increased the ability of smaller political parties to get time on television news channels. Paid news allows parties and individuals with money but no clout to buy content space in newspapers, which can then be circulated to a larger audience through digital tools. Digitization has further aided transparency in information related to political candidates and greater access to voters to analyze them.

The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) owes its potency to the emerging new media, which its national coordinator, Anil Bairwal, says have given voices and space to people who might not have got it otherwise.²⁵² The ADR ran a campaign and started a website in 2009 called Myneta.info (*my neta*, literally “my representative”), which had close to 1 million hits when it became a news portal to coincide with the general elections. ADR could do this because a declaration of assets was made mandatory by the EC for every candidate contesting elections after a Supreme Court ruling. The ADR then tracked how candidates’ personal assets had grown from the time of one election to the next.

However, it may also be argued that the ban on exit polls has reduced political diversity, as they were used by television news channels and other digital formats to conduct debates and discussions, allowing even smaller political parties and candidates to comment on the results and conclusions of such exit polls.

4.4.2 Digital Political Communications

In 2004, the then Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, used a mobile to remind people to vote for a “Shining India”—the first time a major politician had adopted new technology to communicate with voters. Parties now have websites and include SMS (especially for campaigns) and social media networks in their communications strategies, while tech-savvy politicians in power increasingly use official websites to communicate positive news about their administrations.

Concurrently, the launch of dozens of regional television channels owned by politicians has resulted in a huge increase in the number of vernacular journalists who have contributed to diversity in the profession, and therefore in the political messages available. Sanjay Salil, a former journalist, who now advises media groups to set up television news channels or revamp existing ones, observes:

251. “Gujarat poll campaign: Election Commission to check circulation of ‘paid news,’” *DNA*, 18 October 2012, at http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report_gujarat-poll-campaign-election-commission-to-check-circulation-of-paid-news_1753771 (accessed 12 January 2013).

252. Interview with Anil Bairwal, National Coordinator, Association for Democratic Reforms, New Delhi, July 2010.

Since the journalists, who normally work for regional media, have to stay in touch with the various political leaders and interact with them more often, they tend to communicate varying and more widespread views than the mainstream media. Regional journalists also aim to balance their content keeping in mind their viewers/readers, who too are in close proximity.²⁵³

4.5 Assessments

Digital tools have enabled some journalists to don the role of crusaders, some even becoming active participants in big events. They have often successfully forced authorities to act on the issues they have raised. However, multiple media formats and the increased number of media organizations have put pressure on journalists to be first with the news. Hence, even in the case of investigative journalism or sting operations, some rush out unsubstantiated or unbalanced reports. This has added to concerns about the ethics and values of the profession.

Crucial changes in audience patterns have also left their mark. More than 55 percent of India's population is under 25, and these consumers of news are less interested in politics and more in such issues as entertainment, technology, and matters of more immediate concern, such as local crime. Therefore, despite the mushrooming of news channels owned by politicians, media still tend to focus more on infotainment, rather than on traditional political, economic, and social issues.

Media owners have not pushed hard for converged single newsrooms, apparently because they are unconvinced about their efficacy. They have largely neglected to develop their websites, seeing no profit in it. There has also been no urgency to cut editorial costs and maximize content synergies across platforms. This is surprising because most print-media companies (*Hindustan Times*, *The Times of India*, *India Today*, *Outlook*, *The Hindu*, and others) have already invested in technology. But print and television journalists have yet to realize the significance of an online presence, so the concept of digitized and single newsrooms has not taken off.

The strengths of digitization have, ironically, become its weaknesses. Although research and access to information has become easier for investigative reporters, this has caused journalists to become lazy. As Mr Bahl said, they rely too much on online resources, although these should just be their starting points or provide only the background to pursue a story.²⁵⁴

The frenetic pace, partially set by digitization and partly by competition, has led to mistakes, even blunders. In addition, round-the-clock schedules leave reporters and editors with less time to pursue serious, long-term, in-depth investigations. Apart from a few print publications, mainstream television channels and websites have been unable to pursue investigative journalism seriously.

253. Interview with Sanjay Salil, founder, MediaGuru Consultants Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, December 2011.

254. Interview with Aniruddha Bahl, founder, Cobrapost.com, New Delhi, November 2011.

At the same time, digitization has possibly led to greater media censorship by powerful interest groups. Unlike in the case of newspapers and magazines, external pressures to drop a story are much greater in online and television media—because stories can easily be withdrawn from websites and news channels. “Every time I write something important, there are dozens of phone calls from all kinds of people urging me to take the story off from the website,” revealed Ms Bhatt of Rediff.com.²⁵⁵

With national media focusing on national, urban, and middle-class issues, and regional media on more local issues, sub-regional outlets focus on even more micro issues. This trend indicates that social and cultural diversity, especially when it relates to covering marginalized groups and smaller, regional political parties, has improved. The other, equally strong, trend is that specific media tend to restrict the span of diversity, since they seek to concentrate on issues that interest their immediate audiences: while each outlet tends to report a less diverse palate of stories, the increase in the number, language, and spectrum of media outlets has meant a widening of reportage on social and cultural issues.

To ensure fair coverage of elections, the EC initiated critical steps related to part-restrictions on pre-poll surveys and exit polls, and allocation of airtime to political parties. This, maintain experts, has resulted in freer, more transparent, and wider (more diverse) coverage of elections. To wriggle out of the EC’s rules, political parties resorted to paid news in print products, which was not regulated. Although paid news can be criticized on ethical and moral grounds, it has given opportunities to smaller, but rich, parties (and politicians) to address voters, especially at the state and constituency levels. There is also a feeling that restrictions may have reduced diversity, as they enabled television channels and print publications to conduct more political debates during the pre- and post-election periods.

Clearly, digitization (especially the internet and mobile platform) has helped marginalized groups (like ethnic, religious, caste, and social minorities) to voice their views and concerns, which also get reflected in mainstream media at some point in time. Various factions in Kashmir have their own websites, as do advocacy groups of Dalits and sexual minorities.

However, the feeling continues that more of this content and information has to find its way into the mainstream (national and state-level media products). For instance, especially in the wake of recent attacks on Assamese, the coverage of north-eastern states continues to be negligible unless there is a conflict. Such is the case with rural India, whose issues are not reported adequately by national media.

255. Interview with Sheela Bhatt, senior editor, Rediff.com, New Delhi, April–June 2011.