

Content of Hindi and English Television News Channels: The Journalists' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The news is not just an ordinary media product, especially in a democracy. It plays a very crucial role in engaging common people in democratic processes. Television news media plays a vital role in shaping the public opinion which is very important in any democracy. As a result, the content of television news channels has been the topic of serious discussion and research among journalists and academics. This study employed a qualitative approach to reveal the perspectives of working journalists on the different aspects of the content of Hindi and English television news channels.

Keywords: Television news channels, News content, Hindi, English, Presentation, Screen layout.

Introduction

Around twenty years back, India witnessed the emergence of 24x7 television news industry which changed the Indian journalism scenario completely. ‘Speed’ became the key concern and the news content completed a journey from simple news bulletins to dramatic news and current affairs show with a lot of special effects. 24x7 television news channels set the new rules for this profession.

The content of television news channels has been a burning topic of discussion among the journalists and academicians. The issue of television news content has multiple aspects. Several things affect the content of any television news channel. Financial status, TRP (Television Rating Point), business and other interests of the owners, demands of the advertisers, editorial policies, the nature and orientation of editorial team, quality of the employee journalists are few important factors which influence the content of a television news channel. Except for DD news, the whole TV news industry comes from the private sector and profit is the key factor for them. For profit, they need more viewership and cost-effective programming. The competition to catch the eyeballs and reduce the programme production cost, these two factors mainly decide the content of television news channels (Rao, 2016).

Selection of content and presentation of the selected content, these are the two important steps in television news broadcasting. Selection decides ‘what to show’ and presentation decides ‘how to show’. At first, channels select those issues and stories which they want to show to the public and then they decide how to present those selected issues and stories. As discussed above, there are several factors which influence the processes, selection and presentation of news content in a TV news channel. In this study, the various aspects of these issues have been deeply discussed with the working journalists.

Literature Review

As far as TV news is concerned, a number of studies have been done especially on the content of television news channels. The content related status of television news channels has been studied and discussed by many scholars. According to Thussu (2008), the commercial model of television news broadcast has become a common phenomenon across the globe. This model is majorly dependent on advertising and it forces broadcasters to make the news content more entertaining. The element of entertainment has entered into the content as well as the programme formats. Cut throat competition to attract more and more viewers has triggered continuous innovations in programme formats. Docudramas, programmes with the elements of reality TV, talk shows of celebrities, rescue missions, court and crime enactments etc. can easily be seen on television news channels across the globe. As a result, tendency to trivialize the public discourse has become the global phenomenon in television journalism.

While discussing the status of Indian television news content, Garg (2016) observed, “The definition of news is changing faster than our imagination. With national politics, film and entertainment, crime and sports occupying nearly half of the total prime time of peak hours, i.e., 7 p.m. to 11 p.m. of major national news channels, one can understand the plight of other important segments of life requiring equal attention” (p. 131). He raised serious concerns over the negligible interest of television news channels in various more important fields like education, health, science & technology, environment and agriculture.

Many scholars raised the concerns over the undue influence of commercial elements on television news channels. According to Sainath (2016), the India media is controlled mainly by three elements which are called ABC of media – Advertising, Bollywood and Corporate Power. Rao (2016) found, “News channels are more interested in

catering to the needs of advertisers and conveyance of advertisement agencies as viewers are not seen as direct cause of revenue” (p. 30). Rao (2016) further analyzed that cost, logistics, time and technology related limitations of television news channels played a crucial role in deciding the content and presentation.

Roy (2015) described the tabloidization as the biggest threat for the Indian television news media. Giving an example of a leading Hindi news channel, he said that around 25% of the TRPs of that channels came from astrology show and 25% from the saas-bahu serial news and few highly graphic crime news. According to him, tabloidization is the death of good journalism.

The findings of different studies have raised the issues of the neglect of different geographical regions and rural areas by the national television news channels. Singh (2016) found that being the capital of India Delhi dominated in the news content followed by other metro cities like Mumbai. State capitals got around 10 per cent share whereas rural India was completely ignored with less than one per cent share. The death of a school child in Delhi or Mumbai got a lot of media coverage but similar or more serious incidents of rural areas were completely ignored by the national television news media.

Objectives

The objectives of this study were following:

- i) To know the perspective of working television journalists on the selection of news content for Hindi and English television news channels.
- ii) To identify the perspective of working TV journalists on the different presentation related aspects of Hindi and English television news channels.

Research Methodology

A qualitative approach has been applied in this study. In-depth interviews have been conducted to gather the required qualitative data. Interviews are used to get the rich and comprehensive understanding, feelings and knowledge of the interviewees on the concerned issue (Yates, 2004). Tracy (2013) defines interview as, “Interviews elucidate subjectively lived experiences and viewpoints from the respondents’ perspective” (p. 132). Thus, to find out the perspective of working television journalists, in-depth interviews were considered the most suitable method and used in this study.

Four journalists from four television news channels (two Hindi and two English) were purposefully selected for in-depth interviews. These journalists were actively involved in the selection and presentation of the news content in their respective channels. They were found quite suitable to present the perspectives of the content producers. The details of these interviewees have been given in table (1).

Table (1) Details of the interviewees

Name	Designation (At the time of interview)	Represented Channel
Mr Manish Kapoor	Associate Executive Producer	Aaj Tak (Hindi)
Mr. Madhukar Rajput	Senior Producer	News 18 India (Hindi)
Mrs Pragya Tiwari	Deputy Executive Producer	India Today (English)
Mr Rajiv Kumar	Associate Editor	CNN News 18 (English)

Findings

The responses of the interviewees have been presented according to the objectives of this study.

The content of television news channels in the current scenario

All the interviewees unanimously accepted the key role of TRP (television rating points) in the selection and presentation of the news content in television news channels. Mrs Tiwari explained, “We are running a commercial news channel and we need numbers (TRP).” According to Mr Kapoor, “In practice, the definition of news is little different from the bookish definitions. The capacity to attract more and more eyeballs is the most important factor. If a story or issue has the capacity to attract the viewers, then it is big news for the TV channels.

The cases of Baba Ram Raheem, Hanipreet and Sridevi are the recent examples.” Mr Rajput and Mr Kumar also supported the same.

While discussing the prime time content, Mr Rajput opined that the viewers were more interested in politics, crime and conflict, and the TRP figures supported this fact. According to Mr Kapoor, “We select content according to viewers’ interest. If viewers will show interest to watch more stories on education, health, agriculture and other development related stories, then channels will certainly give more coverage to these issues. But viewers mean the mass viewers. There may be a small section of the audience that wants to watch these issues more, but channels can’t take decisions according to the interests of a small section of the viewers. They need TRP for their financial sustainability”. According to Mrs Tiwari, viewers show two faces. On one hand, they criticize the long and dramatic coverage of Sridevi’s death in public, but on the other hand, they watch these types of stuff with keen interest. The TRP figures have proved this fact.

Representation of different parts of the country in national TV news channels

All the interviewees supported this fact that viewers are comparatively more interested in watching the content related to their own areas. While explaining the less representation of south Indian states in Hindi news channels, Mr Rajput said, “There is a general understanding in our newsroom that Hindi viewers are more interested in watching stories from their own areas and we apply this concept in the selection of the news content.” According to Mrs. Tiwari, English news channels mainly have their viewers in big cities and while selecting the stories we keep this fact in our mind. Mr. Kumar also supported this point of view.

Increasing share of views in news channels

The literature revealed that the share of views (debate-discussions and interview-based programmes) had been increased during the prime time broadcast. The interviewees explained this phenomenon in different ways. According to Mr Kapoor, the internet has changed the news consumption pattern significantly. Now, a big section of news viewers gets the latest news from online platforms, so during evening prime time, television channels try to show them some updates and views of different stakeholders and experts through the debate-discussion programmes. Mrs Tiwari opined, “Debate-discussion based programmes have sticking factor and they are attracting viewers.” Mr Rajput and Mr Kumar both expressed similar opinions.

Role of language in the selection and presentation of the content (Hindi vs English)

According to Mr Kumar, language plays a very important role in the selection and presentation of the news content. Television news channels of all languages prepare their content according to the interest and demand of their viewers, and as far as Hindi and English viewers are concerned, there is a big difference. Mrs Tiwari explained, “English and Hindi viewers are quite different, so language plays an important role in the selection and presentation of the content. For example, programmes like *Adbhut Avishwasneey Akalpneey* gets good TRP on Aaj Tak but it can’t attract English viewers. So, you’ll not find such programmes on our English channel.”

Both the interviewees from Hindi channels also showed their agreement on this point of view. According to Mr Kapoor, Hindi and English viewers come from different academic, economic and residential backgrounds. These differences influence their taste and preferences. So, language has a crucial role in the selection and presentation of the content. Mr Kapoor further elaborated, “I want to give one example. If I’ll prepare a bulletin for our English channel, India Today, I’ll take more stories from metro cities because our viewers are mainly coming from these areas. I’ll give a proper share to south Indian cities also. But, while producing a bulletin for Aaj Tak (Hindi), my strategy will be different. The share of news from south India will go down. I’ll give proper coverage to non-metro cities like Lucknow, Patna, Jaipur, Bhopal and even some smaller towns also. So, here you can clearly see that language of the channel plays a very important role in the selection of the news content.”

According to Mr Rajput, Hindi and English news channels of the same group broadcast different content in different ways. The dramatic appearance of a crime show anchor can bring good TRP for Hindi channels but English viewers will not show much interest in this type of presentation. According to him, the language of the channel plays a crucial role in the selection and presentation of the news content because the viewers of a particular language may have different interests. In the case of Hindi vs English, there is a big difference between the taste and preferences of Hindi and English viewers.

Other presentation related aspects of TV news channels

The interviewees presented their views on different presentation related aspects. While discussing the duration of advertisement and frequency of commercial breaks, all the interviewees opined that there should be a balance between channels' revenue and audience viewing experience. According to Mr Kumar, channels should take a middle path. Advertisements are must for financial sustainability but if they lose viewers, they'll lose advertisement revenue too. Mr Rajput opined, "TRAI's advertisement cap (12 minutes per clock hour) has been challenged in court and there is also a possibility of favourable judgement. But at last channels will have to follow this cap under the viewers' pressure. Finally, we all need viewers." According to Mrs Tiwari, TRAI's ad cap may not be a big issue for bigger news channels but small channels may suffer.

Mr Kapoor admitted that long and frequent advertisement breaks affect the audience's viewing experience negatively but he also highlighted the need of advertisement for a news channel. According to him, ads are the main source of income for any Indian TV news channel. They can't avoid advertisements but they can't irritate viewers too. They are getting ads due to the viewers only. So, the channels will have to make a balance and they are trying for it. Advertisements through graphic layovers (L band ads, Aston band ads, scroller ads, etc.) are emerging as effective options. These types of advertisements are played along with the content. So, advertisers get more viewership and audience gets content along with the ads. It is a win-win situation.

While discussing the different programme formats, Mr Kapoor highlighted the use of speed/fast bulletins. According to him, speed bulletins are very useful for Hindi news channels. They help news channels to cover more number of news stories in a limited time. It enables the Hindi news channels to cover stories of small towns also. Since a large section of Hindi viewers comes from the small towns, speed bulletins help channels to connect with their viewers.

Screen layout was considered as one of the key presentation related aspects in this study. All the interviewees showed their agreement to the need for proper and comprehensive research in this area. According to Mrs Tiwari, everything is done for the viewers only. If viewers will not like the present screen layout, channels will certainly modify it. Mr Kapoor told, "News channels have become half newspapers. They are giving a lot of material on their screens to read. Due to throat cut competition, channels want to provide more and more information to their viewers." Mr Kapoor further explained, "There is one more angle. Sometimes more number of graphics compensates the scarcity of footage. For example, we get a big news but we have just 15 seconds footage of that incident. In that case, if we show that small piece of footage on the whole screen repeatedly, it'll certainly bore the viewers. So, channels show that footage repeatedly in a small window, and other updates may be provided through text on different graphic overlays." According to Mr Rajput, news channels are providing maximum information through graphics also. Viewers can understand a lot of content in a mute channel too.

Conclusions

This study presents the working television journalists' point of views on different aspects of the content of Hindi and English television news channels. It also highlights the comparative status of Hindi and English TV news content. TRP has emerged as the most significant deciding factor in the selection and presentation of news content. The participant journalists have accepted the important role of language in deciding the content for any television news channel. Differences between Hindi and English viewers are not limited only to the linguistic aspects. Social and economic factors are also involved. In India, English is the language of elites with higher educational qualifications, better purchasing power and higher social positioning. Thus, in this context, the language of the TV news channel attracts a distinguished section of viewers with different educational, economic and social status.

The study reveals that the internet has changed the news consumption pattern significantly. Now, a big section of news viewers gets the latest news from online platforms. Therefore, the share of views based programmes (debate-discussion, interviews etc.) has been increased. As far as duration and frequency of commercial breaks are concerned, all the interviewed journalists opined that there should be a balance between channels' revenue and audience viewing experience. The middle path has been suggested. Advertisements are must for financial

sustainability but if they lose viewers, they'll lose advertisement revenue too. Screen layout has been considered as one of the key presentation related aspect. The need for proper and comprehensive research on suitable screen layout for TV news channels has been felt. The crowded screen layouts were found as the result of competition to provide more and more information by using every inch of the screen space.

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