An Inexorable Watchdog: The Evolution of India’s News Media in Re-shaping Democratic Traditions

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Research abstract submitted for consideration by the ICA pre-conference, “India and Communication Studies”
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Indian media have served the world’s largest democracy as an inexorable watchdog. The country’s free press has helped sustain Indian democratic traditions in sharp contrast to some neighboring nations where military dictators have stifled the press and democratic values.

India’s media inform, educate, and entertain a population of 1.2 billion, which is roughly one-sixth of the world’s people. More than one-third (35.2 %, 2001 Census) of India’s population cannot read or write but are avid audiences of radio, television, multimedia programs, and Internet content. India’s burgeoning media landscape encompasses nearly 65,000 newspapers and periodicals in 123 languages and dialects, more than 300 national and regional television channels featuring news and entertainment programs in English and 22 national languages, nearly 300 million mobile phone subscribers and a rising number of active Internet users.

**Economy Fosters Media Boom**

India’s expanding media have been catapulted by its growing economy, the world’s fourth largest after United States, China, and Japan defined in terms of gross domestic product at purchasing power parity per capita.

Despite impressive gains steered by sweeping economic reforms (and some deregulation) since 1991 and by growing international investment, there is a wide chasm between the rich and poor. For instance, in 2007, every fourth Indian lived below the poverty line even as India was home to 36 billionaires (defining assets in US dollars). India faces other problems such as overpopulation, environmental degradation, government and business corruption, an extensive underground black market economy, ethnic conflict, religious riots, terrorism, and neglect of children. These problems have long been a staple of news coverage in India.

A vibrant economy has reinvigorated Indian media with increased advertising spending, rising international investment, growing income levels, and a surge in consumer spending. India’s newspaper market is among the largest in the world. More than 150 million people read a newspaper in India every day compared to 97 million Americans and 48 million Germans.

In 2002, the Indian government eased a 1955 ban on foreign investment in magazines and newspapers. By 2008, it had approved 15 foreign investment bids for news and current affairs media besides approving publication of international newspaper facsimile editions. As newspaper readership stagnates in the US and Europe, global companies such as the US-based Blackstone Group, England's Pearson, publisher of the *Financial Times*, England's Associated Newspapers, have invested in Indian media. Newspaper circulation in India has been growing and advertising increased by 15 percent in 2007. Such double-digit growth rates are projected to continue until 2014. India’s print media recorded a growth of 16% over 2007 at nearly $ 2.9 billion and estimated to double in size by 2012.
In 2005, the Indian government relaxed restrictions and has approved 189 Indian editions of foreign speciality, technical and scientific magazines. Such opportunities have attracted prominent global magazine publishers including Condé Nast (Vogue and GQ), Time (People), Meredith Corporation (Child), Dennis Publishing (Maxim), Rodale (Prevention), and Axel Springer (Autobild). Indian editions have enabled publishers to target the Indian market with indigenized innovations and online features, helped readers subscribe international magazines at affordable prices and opened new avenues for advertisers. With a 17% growth in 2008, the Indian media and entertainment industry has emerged as among the fastest growing sectors of the Indian economy. The entertainment and media industry has grown cumulatively at 19% over 2005-08 to an estimated size of $10.9 billion. While the advertising industry increased by 22% in 2007, online advertising was up nearly 70% in that year. The entertainment segment of animation, gaming and visual effects industry grew by 24% at nearly $3.2 billion in 2007.

Indian media’s prosperous times may be attributed to several factors such as government’s liberal reforms inviting foreign investment in media, a focused media fare devoid of free content online due to low Internet penetration, a rising literacy rate, sophisticated print and broadcast technologies, increased purchasing power of the middle class, rise in advertising and consumerism, growing popularity of infotainment, and round-the-clock media content on television and the Internet.

Press Development
India’s first English newspaper appeared under fortuitous circumstances. By the 1760s, the Indian empire of Britain’s East India Company grew to paramount power. Despite such business and imperial power, there were no newspapers in Calcutta, the seat of British colonial rule for decades and second only to London in population. In 1780, James Augustus Hicky, an expatriate Irishman, published India’s first English newspaper, the Bengal Gazette or the Calcutta General Advertiser. Hicky quickly realized that truly distinguished newspapers should serve society, even at the risk of official displeasure. His newspaper made interesting reading with its ample dose of scurrilous reporting, risqué advertisements reflecting low morality in society, and scandalous accounts of the misdeeds of British administrators. In 1781, British rulers charged him with libel. He was harassed, attacked, and jailed. Undaunted, Hicky continued to edit his newspaper from prison, though his publication did not survive long and Hicky died a pauper in 1802.

The early 19th Century saw the birth of several newspapers, both in English and regional Indian languages. In 1818, the Baptist missionaries of Serampore published a Bengali newspaper, Samachar Darpan (The Mirror of Truth) and the English periodical, The Friend of India, which were self-proclaimed organs of Christian thought and doctrine. Ram Mohan Roy, the Indian leader and social reformer, published in 1821 the Bengali newspaper, Sambad Kaumudi (Moon of Reason), which propagated the radical Western Hindu viewpoint. By 1822, there were six Bengali papers in and around the Calcutta area with circulations of 400 to 800 copies and widespread influence among readers. In 1823, when the British tried to censor the Calcutta press, Roy, as founder and editor of India’s earliest newspapers, organized a protest designating freedom of speech and religion as natural rights for the people. Founded in July 1822, the Gujarati publication, Bombay Samachar, has been the oldest continuously published newspaper in India.

The newspaper emerged as a powerful social and political force during the freedom movement in India. The British rulers enacted in 1878 the Vernacular Press Act to repress “seditious propaganda” in regional language newspapers. Lord Lytton, the British viceroy,
denounced vernacular newspapers as “mischievous scribblers preaching open sedition” to end the British Raj. Faced with severe criticism and protest, the British rulers repealed the Act in 1882. In 1880, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, a social reformer and nationalist, founded the Marathi daily Kesari (Lion), which attracted widespread readership for its opposition to British rule. British officials jailed Tilak in 1897 for his writings.

Fewer than two decades later, Mahatma Gandhi, the architect of India’s freedom from British rule, played a prominent role as editor of three newspapers—Young India, Harijan (meaning “child of God,” coined as a euphemism for Untouchables by Gandhi in 1931) and Navajivan, (New Life)—which became major vehicles for Gandhian thought and action. As an outstanding 20th century leader, Gandhi authored a prodigious number of words. Through his newspaper columns, he assiduously propagated his ideas as a prophet of non-violence and Satyagraha (the firmness of truth). This empowered members of the meek Indian masses to fight against seemingly invincible British rule. In 1938, Gandhi’s lieutenant Jawaharlal Nehru founded the English newspaper, National Herald and its sister Urdu publication Qaumi Awaz (“Voice of the Community”) to uphold such national values as secularism and non-alignment. Nehru, who became the first prime minister of independent India in 1947, gained renown for his political acumen and scholarship.

Language Diversity

In the post-independence era, Indian journalism sustained its influential role on two fronts. First, the urban elite relied on the English-language media, which was a dominant legacy of the British Raj. Second, the regional language media played a vital role in educating and informing a significant section of Indians who prefer to read and view media in their native language.

India’s language diversity extends beyond Hindi, the official language, and English, the subsidiary official language, to more than 22 officially recognized languages and hundreds of regional dialects. Such pluralism is richly represented in the print media, radio channels, news web sites, blogs, wikis, and television programs that reflect multicultural heterogeneity, diverse social values, and an array of linguistic traditions. The Paris-based World Association of Newspapers’ list of “World’s 100 Largest Newspapers” features 17 Indian newspapers, including three English dailies, seven Hindi publications, and seven regional language publications. Most of these newspapers publish color broadsheet editions printed simultaneously in several cities and maintain web sites for their domestic and international readers.

Other media entities are also committed to language diversity. All India Radio’s services cover 24 languages and 146 dialects. The Indian government plans to add 107 community radio stations to the 38 existing community radio stations to spearhead rural empowerment and dissemination of information with local language programming. India’s two primary news agencies, the Press Trust of India (PTI) and the United News of India (UNI), provide news coverage and information in both English and Hindi. UNI’s wire services are also available in Urdu.

The Indian government provides advertising support to regional language newspapers in Bodo, Dogri, Garhwali, Khasi, Kashmiri, Konkani, Maithili, Manipuri, Mizo, Nepali, Rajasthani, Sanskrit, Santhali, Sindhi, Urdu and tribal languages. It extends similar concessions to newspapers published from backward, remote hilly and border areas and in Jammu and Kashmir, Andaman Nicobar and eight northeastern states.
News Agencies
Launched in 1961, UNI was the first Indian news agency to offer a financial service, a stock exchange service, and a national photo service. UNI also features specialized content services like Unidarshan (television news clips and features), UNIscan (news display on television sets for hotels, top government officials, and corporate clients), UNIDirect (for top executives in the government, corporate, and other sectors) and UNIgraphics (computer-designed graphics in ready-to-use form).

India’s largest news agency, PTI, is a non-profit cooperative owned by the country’s newspapers. PTI subscribers include 450 newspapers in India and several media entities abroad. All major broadcast channels in India and abroad subscribe to PTI. Founded in 1949, PTI’s origin dates back to 1910 when Keshab Chandra Roy, a political correspondent from India, founded the Associated Press of India in London as a news pooling arrangement with journalists. By 1919, Reuters became the sole supplier of foreign and domestic news to the government and to the newspapers of India.

PTI has collaborative arrangements with the Associated Press (AP), Agencies France Presse (AFP), and Bloomberg for distribution of their news feeds in India, and with the Associated Press for its photo service and international commercial information. PTI exchanges news with nearly 100 news agencies worldwide as part of bilateral and multilateral arrangements, including the Non-Aligned News Agencies Pool and the Organization of Asia-Pacific News Agencies.

Broadcast Media
Radio broadcasting started in India with the Radio Club of Bombay’s first broadcast in 1923. This was followed by regular Broadcasting Services in 1927 with two privately-owned transmitters at Bombay and Calcutta. The Indian Government took over the transmitters in 1930 under the aegis of Indian Broadcasting Service, re-named All India Radio in 1936 and Akashvani (meaning the “Voice from the Sky”) after 1957.

Doordarshan (meaning “View from Afar”), a public service broadcaster and one of the largest terrestrial television networks in the world, started in New Delhi as an experiment in 1959 with half-hour programs on education and development. Regular television service commenced in major Indian cities such as Delhi in 1965, Mumbai (Bombay) in 1972, Kolkata (Calcutta) and Chennai (Madras) in 1975. Television services were separated from radio in 1976. India introduced color television in 1982 coinciding with the Asian Games held in New Delhi.

With the advent of color television, the state-owned broadcaster Doordarshan introduced in 1982 Doordarshan National programs that ushered in a major broadcasting revolution with national telecast of government events, sports, soaps, and other programming that attracted nationwide viewership and advertisements.

India’s first long running television soap opera, *Hum Log* (We People), which began in 1984, was designed to promote women’s status in Indian society with prosocial messages about equal status for women, family harmony, and smaller family size. Doordarshan commissioned television adaptation of the ancient Indian religious epics, *Ramayan* (1987-88) and *Mahabharat* (1989-90). These mythological serials became instant television hits that cut across rural-urban barriers to attract advertisers and viewers across India and abroad. Doordarshan also featured an array of programming innovations such as Indian soap operas, comedy shows, children’s program and crime thrillers that led to its exponential expansion.
In response to both political protests and popular demands that the government-owned broadcasters should be autonomous like those in other countries, the All India Radio and Doordarshan were merged in 1997 under Prasar Bharati (Broadcasting Corporation of India), a regulatory agency. Television ceased to be under strict government control by 1990 when transborder satellite channels such as Star TV and CNN began beaming programs. Jaded with Doordarshan’s staid programming steeped in officialdom, urban residents installed receivers to access satellite programs. Some local entrepreneurs started offering television services, albeit illegal, that provided access to an array of international channels. The government’s economic liberalization and deregulation of the 1990s led to a proliferation of international satellite television, global television channels, and cable networks.

During the late-1990s. Indian television audience enjoyed a plethora of channel choices comprising CNN, BBC, MTV, Western soap operas and movies on television channels. Some pan-Indian television networks featured Indian movies, music prayer services, soap operas and news features in English and local languages. By 1998 several international television channels adopted programs with local flavor in response to waning interest in foreign television content. Indian entertainment television channels such as Zee TV, Star Plus, and Sony Entertainment introduced shows based on socio-cultural themes, pluralism of ethnic and cultural norms, local language messages, and region-specific interests to compete with pan-Indian networks in localized markets.

India’s broadcast media environment offers nearly 300 channels including program choices from Doordarshan, domestic and global media companies such as News Corporation, Sony Entertainment and Walt Disney. Today, such programs also attract a global audience. India’s entertainment television channels such as Star One, Bollywood 4 U, TV ASIA, Sahara TV, MTV India re-package their media content for the global south Asian diaspora across Europe, Africa, Australia, and the Americas. Besides exerting greater cultural influence with transforming television content, these media companies have led to increased journalistic independence and greater scrutiny of the government.

Faced with competition from private channels, Doordarshan, the public broadcaster, has reconfigured its programs with sports, news and entertainment content and introduced a satellite television service with no subscription fees. Its programs now reach 90 percent of the population through a network of nearly 1400 terrestrial transmitters and 65 studios. Doordarshan remains the most widely available network, especially in rural areas, where a majority of the population lives.

The Indian television industry is expected to grow annually at around 22% over 2009 through 2012. The direct to home (DTH) satellite television and broadcasting industry is expected to grow annually at 48% over 2009 through 2013. While DTH homes are projected to increase 525% from 4 million in 2007 to 25 million in 2012, the pay television homes are projected to increase by 55% from 74 million in 2007 to 115 million in 2012.

India’s radio industry is set to grow by 200% over 2009 through 2012. India’s FM radio industry plans to offer services in 275 cities across the world as part government reforms that began in 2005. The FM radio industry seeks to fund this unprecedented growth with foreign direct investment limits of 49% for non-news channels and 26% for news channels. These services will act as a useful supplement to the radio services of All India Radio, which served 99.14% of the Indian
population in 2008 with 229 broadcasting centers supported by 148 medium frequency, 54 high frequency, and 168 FM transmitters.

**Journalism and Communication Education in India**

India’s media boom has led to rapid developments in journalism and communication education. The number of institutions for journalism and communication education has increased from six in the 1940s to more than 86 universities with curricula for journalism and communication education. In addition, more than 283 private institutions offer training programs in various aspects of the media industry. Some universities now offer graduate programs in media and communications studies in India. This has led to a multifold increase in student enrollment in journalism and communication schools and a growing demand for journalism educators and teaching resources.

India has been a major seat of higher education for several centuries and its science and technology talent pool is among the largest worldwide. However, journalism and communication education in India has faced various challenges such as inadequate funding, shortage of well-qualified educators, lack of equipment, library resources and support staff. In addition, journalism and communication education is also handicapped by dearth of institutional investment in exploring research issues that integrate and inform the media scholarship with theoretical perspectives and comprehensive methods. Most journalism and communication schools in India may benefit from encouraging their faculty and students to pursue erudite research on media trends from a scholarly perspective.

**Press Freedom**

The Indian Constitution provides for “the right to freedom of speech and expression,” but stipulates the government can restrict those rights under some circumstances, such as maintenance of public order, state security, and public morality. In 1975, under controversial circumstances of political instability, India declared a “State of Emergency” to restore the “security of Indiathreatened by internal disturbances.” During the 21-month “State of Emergency” (1975-77), Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed restrictions on the media, curtailed civil liberties, suspended elections, and resorted to severe misuse of power. Opposition leaders and journalists were jailed. However, the press in India survived the “State of Emergency” to report Indira Gandhi’s defeat in the 1977 general elections. Unshackled from draconian excesses of the Emergency, people called for institutional reforms and greater government accountability. This led to a quantum jump in the number of newspapers and magazines, contributing to a media boom.


In 2005, India introduced the Right to Information Act that authorizes citizens to request information from a “public authority,” which has been stipulated to reply “expeditiously or within 30 days.” The act also requires public authorities to computerize their records for wide dissemination and to proactively publish certain categories of information. With the crusading zeal of a perpetual adversary, the Indian media campaigned and influenced public demands for this right with fervent calls for a free flow of information.
Internet and Emerging Technologies
In August 1995, India began full-scale Internet service for public access through the Videsh Sanchar Nigam, India’s overseas communications agency. That led to rapid diffusion of Internet communication nationwide (estimated 150 million Internet users in 2009). Despite a yawning digital divide, modern communication systems in Indian cities co-exist with abysmal connectivity in the remote villages, where more than 70 percent of India’s population lives. Compared to traditional landline phones, mobile phones have emerged as the dominant mode for telephony in rural areas, where fewer people own phones and it is easy to link distant villages with cost-efficient installation of mobile infrastructure. Mobile phones also provide similar flexibility and convenience to the urban consumer.

India has the world’s fastest growing mobile phone market. By 2012, India plans to double its phone subscriber base to 700 million users, covering nearly 70 percent of the country’s population. India’s teledensity or the number of phone users for every 100 individuals in rural areas stands at 13% and 72% in urban areas. The national average is 32%. Of the 364 million telephone subscribers in October 2008, 326 million were mobile phone users. In 2009, India adopted the third generation (3G) mobile technology that provides users access to high-end data applications, including high speed interactive gaming and Internet access, video conferencing, video streaming and other multimedia features on the phone.

The recent growth of the Internet in India has led to a spurt in online journalism comprising news web sites, blogs, wikis, and some crowd-sourced citizen journalism that has permeated the national consciousness. Since 2000, online journalism in India has exposed a range of issues such as political corruption, misuse of state funds and match-fixing in professional cricket, India’s national pastime. A large section of the Indian news audience regularly access web sites of mainstream media, Twitter, photo and video sharing sites, wikis, blogs for breaking news and commentary. During the November 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, more than nine million people in India and abroad accessed the web site of The Times of India, India’s largest English-language newspaper. Page views on the Times of India web site saw a fourfold increase from 4.5 million on November 27, 2008, the day after the attacks, to more than 17 million the next day. Breaking news of the terrorist attacks featured on blogs and Twitter messages.

India’s burgeoning blogging community, comprising more than 150,000 blogs, covers topics like politics, social issues, Bollywood celebrities, Indian culture, and technology trends. Mirroring the success and influence of the Indian language media, Indian bloggers represent the rich diversity of regional languages and local issues. A significant number of Indian bloggers communicate in English to reach a global audience both in India and abroad.

With the imminent convergence of information, communication and entertainment media, India plans to implement Internet Protocol Television (IPTV), a digital television service delivered through an Internet network infrastructure. IPTV provides viewers with a new visual digital experience enhanced by myriad value-added interactive services that meld infotainment and e-commerce. Such plans may lead to an augmented demand for broadband connectivity in India.

Conclusion
Checkered circumstances have transformed media in a developing nation like India where a sizable segment of the Indian population is illiterate and impoverished. Faced with major economic and social changes, India’s media reflects diversity of content and growth. Exciting changes in
entertainment media, phenomenal growth in emerging technologies, a plethora of broadcast media choices, a burgeoning print media, and a steady diffusion of innovations, such as improved telephony and Internet connectivity, have re-shaped India’s media.

India provides a captivating context for studying the role of media and democracy. Indian media have broadened and deepened democracy by acting as a bridge between the government and the governed. To this end, the media have galvanized civil society to campaign more vigorously for institutional reforms and greater government accountability by melding multiple democratic roles as an inexorable watchdog of democracy. In its best role, the Indian media have acted as a reliable source for news and information; a credible critic of the government; an active adversary; an investigator of corruption; an intellectual interpreter of events; and a forum for public expression of censure and praise. Thus, the Indian media have not only influenced democracy but helped preserve it.
References


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