TELEVISION DEBATE SHOWS ON THE CENTER STAGE OF PROPAGATING IDEOLOGICAL CONTENT: AN ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL NEWS CHANNELS

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Abstract

Despite being the constant source for disseminating information and messages to viewers, television news channels have now taken center stage compared to other news platforms in India. At present, television debate shows can set a tone for any issue and create public opinion on the same. According to Oyesomi (2014), political participation is essential to ensuring the stability and legitimacy of every political system. This is also well researched and explained that due to the increase in the popularity of these television debates, they can change or shift the behavior of voters. Moreover, there is also a constant debate in the media sphere about how media is taking part in influencing the expression and formation of public opinion (Lang and Lang 1968), and this is also well discussed in public discourse, that media text or visuals articulate the way of reacting to the world. These messages can implicitly convince their viewers on their version and pattern of the story. With particular examples within media, we can observe how media define specific words, and the majority finds that definition appropriate and suited for the harmony and integrity of the nation. The prime focus of this research is a) to investigate the role of these television debates shows in covering political issues and b) to know the association between ideological representation and treatment of debate shows. This research is based on primary data, and the interview method was used to collect data.

Paper Identification

Introduction

The role of television news channels in disseminating the information and being aware of the targeted groups is inevitable, and television has impacted the viewers' perceptions on specific issues. The role of television news in creating a public opinion on issues being covered or discussed is not new. Several researchers have explained the impact of television on viewers, especially in the events like elections, where the coverage on television news channels regarding any issue can reshape the viewers' reality. The concept of the news reality frame given by Bennett in 2006 is the appropriate explanation to understand the impact of television programs on viewers' perceptions. As

described by Bennett news reality frame is that condition that blurs the connection between the actual reality and surrounding of the event and its perceived reality by the media. (Bennett, 2006)

As described by Harold Lasswell, the primary function of mass media is surveillance. The media is considered a watchdog and constantly functions as a mediator between policymakers and the common masses. As the fourth estate of democracy, the responsibility of mass media is essential as they can change the reality of the events, and on the basis of the coverage of the issues in media, viewers perceive the event (Gerbner, 1956). During the covid-19 pandemic, mainstream media sets different narratives to explain the possible root cause of the virus. In some of the channels, they have identified themes to discredit China as they called the virus to be used as a bio weapon by China. (Angie Y. Chung et al. 2021). In the context of India during the Bengal election, the channels attached psychological values to the events, and they connected those constructs to the mental concepts of the viewers so that viewers could relate to the agenda of the media and conclude the event as per the planned agenda.

Tiki Balas (2009) highlighted media's crucial and vital aspect in his study. He said there is an apparent disconnect between the thought process of editors and the viewers. The reason behind this disconnect is that viewers do not have many choices, so they adjust their needs as per the available programs, and editors only emphasize gaining more profit, so for them, the basis of producing the programs is profit. While Balas explained the disconnect between the editors and viewers, the research by Kathleen Hall Jamieson (2015) explained the impact of presidential debates on the decision-making of the viewers. She said that there is an association between the coverage of the issues and events related to the presidential debates and the winner of the presidential candidate. She concluded that viewers decide to select the presidential candidate

based on the coverage in the media. In their research, Serena Daalmans et al. (2004) explained the impact of television programs on the viewers' morality. They have said that data suggest that the programs on television have a clear impact on the morality of the viewers and how morally they perceive the primetime programming of any channel affects any event. To talk about the impact of camera angles, visual representation, and facial expressions of the main actors and their impact on the viewers, Echo E. Fields (1989) explains that the visual language and symbolic aspects like anchors' facial expressions help give direction to the events covered by the media. Pirkko Nuolija & Liisa Tiittula (2011), in their research, argued about the concept of irony in the debate shows on television. They have said that irony is constantly used in the debate shows on television, and this irony is responsible for the change in the reality of the events covered during the debates. The viewers consider this changed reality and change their verdict about the event after consuming the data related to the event from the debates. It is established that media is powerful and can change the realities for the viewers, and this phenomenon leads to media bias.

Swati Aggarwal et al. (2020) explain that media bias is a constant and common phenomenon in television news. They have also said that the way media channels cover certain issues to reframe facts of the events' and realities for the viewers. This treatment of the events caused a tilted version, and based on this slanted information, viewers decode their conclusion. Dhavan V. Shah et al. (2002) discussed how media could connect the events to the associated events in the memory codes of the viewers. They gave an example of a controversy between Lewinsky controversy, President Bill Clinton, and how the media gave attention to the issue. They said that the way media attached the value to the personal events of Bill Clinton to his professional work explained how media could

prime an issue. They concluded that the connection of media construct to the cognitive concepts of viewers is responsible for shaping the reality for the viewers. In this research, the researcher analyzes the representation of political issues on the primetime debate shows of Indian national news channels. The research also describes the association between media treatment parameters and ideological content propagation in primetime debates. This research also analyzes the role of anchors or moderators of the primetime debates in the orchestration of opinion-based programs.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this present research is Media Priming. Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder gave the Media Priming theory in 1982. As described by Iyenger, Peters, and Kinder, priming theory is known as the predecessor to the agenda-setting theory. This theory is about the impact of media coverage on the decision-making of the viewers; this feature is similar to the agenda-setting theory. Priming is usually planned prior to setting the agenda as agenda can be used by the media channels to achieve the priming elements. Priming can reshape and alter the viewers' reality, and they make their decision based on the coverage of the issues in media. Due to this, the decision-making of the viewers is highly influenced by priming. This present research attempts to understand the role of the coverage of the issues on primetime debate shows on the Indian news channels.

Objectives

These are the major objectives of this research paper:

1.   To investigate the role of television debate shows in covering political issues
2.   To know the association between ideological representation and treatment of debate shows.

Research Methodology

The present research is based on a qualitative study design. To critically analyze the above-mentioned objectives, it was essential to use a descriptive research design. This present research is based on primary data. The researcher has interviewed the media professionals to understand the ecosystem and functioning of the television news channels. The researcher has asked the media professionals questions about the basis of selection of the issue for the primetime debate, the role of the moderator in the debates, the criteria for selecting the panelists in the debate shows, and the association between the viewers and the debate shows. The researcher has interviewed ten prominent journalists from channels like Republic, DD News, Zee News, and India TV. The following questions were asked to collect the data

1.   According to you, what role television debate shows are playing in shaping the perception of the masses?
2.   Do you think that anchors are playing their role fairly? If not, can you elaborate on the reasons and their impact?
3.   According to you, the factors of objectivity can be seen in the debates? If not, state some examples.
4.   As debate shows are opinion-based shows, do you think that parameters of plurality have been maintained on the primetime debate shows?
5.   According to you, what are the roles of experts and guests in the debates, and how do they contribute in reshaping the reality for the viewers?

The researcher has recorded the interviews with journalists and analyzed the data after transcribing the recorded version to understand the process, importance, and impact of primetime debate shows.

Discussion: Media Treatment of the Debate Shows

Media treatment of the news on television debates is the core of any show produced by the channels for the

viewers. As defined by the NBA (2008), media treatment is the process of applying news elements like neutrality, fairness, objectivity, and non-biasness. While asking to the respondents how they see the media treatment of these debate shows on the primetime, 85% said that objectivity is not easily visible in these debates. Objectivity is the core of news stories, but debates are opinion-based shows, so it is challenging to maintain the elements of objectivity. The respondents said that on paper, it seems like the channels are maintaining the criteria of the objectivity, but practically, it is not visible as it seems like the agenda of the debates are already set, and the data and facts presented by the anchors or by the panelists as well are tilted and have context attached to it. Around 70% of the respondents said that in opinion-based shows, it is not easy to refrain from personal bias, which is why there is no objectivity in the debates. The respondents also added one crucial aspect related to debates. They have said in all the debates that valence (psychological value) is visible and can be seen in the data and facts presented by the anchors and the panelists during the discussion. They gave examples of events like the India-Pakistan issue, the India-China border issue, and the issues like coronavirus protests against farm bills and CAA. The respondents said that the anchors add psychological values to the debates from the start of the debate. The anchors asked questions with an ideological tilt, which kills the objectivity in the debates. While answering about fairness and neutrality in the debates, 75% of the respondents said that fairness during the debates is also not visible as fairness is associated with objectivity completely. They have added that the arguments made during the debates are not primarily relevant.

Discussion: Role of Moderator in the Debate Shows

While answering the questions related to the role and impact of moderators or anchors in the debate shows, around 90% of them said that debate shows are entirely dependent on the conduct of the moderator or anchors. The respondents said that most of the anchors of the debate shows are experienced and have a good command of the language, but at present, the aggressive nature of the anchors is a common phenomenon. Eighty percent of the respondent said that the conduct of the anchors is also titled as they are more harsh, aggressive, and hyper when they talk about the opposition parties, whereas their tone is docile, soft, and humble when they talk about the Government. This one demarcation is itself explains how the anchors are also not following the parameters of fairness. The moderator or the anchor of the debates is not giving equal time to all the panelists during the discussion, even if they interrupt the panelists if the answer or the facts given by the panelists are not aligned to the agenda of the channel. Around 95% of the respondents said that anchors are not providing detailed background of the issue being discussed, and they start the debate with one statement, which is usually tilted, and take one side of the story as the bottom line of the debate. Around 80% of them pointed out that the fairness of the anchors during the primetime debates is also questionable. The anchors' facial expressions are always positive when they talk about the Government, but the expression shifts to a negative attitude immediately after talking about the opposition parties. The respondents said that in most of the debates, the tone of the discussion is generally positive (pro-government). The personality of the anchors or moderator is also an essential part of the debate shows, and according to the interviewees, the personality of the anchors on these primetime debates is aggressive primarily. They scream, speak loudly, and do not allow anyone to put their point of view without consent. Even in some debates, Republic and Times-Now anchors have used technology to stop the panelists from commenting on the discussed issue. The respondents suggested that the anchors must follow the journalistic ethics and focus the treatment of the

debates on presenting data and facts and not give a clear verdict of each debate as this is not the job of the channels. The viewers must conclude.

Discussion: Plurality in Debates

As per the definition of Plurality by Ofcom, it represents different aspects and viewpoints on any given issue. As primetime debate shows are opinion-based programs, plurality is integral to such programs. When it was asked to the respondents whether, according to them, the parameters of the plurality are being maintained by the channels or not, most of them said that plurality of two types, i.e., internal and external, and in the case of primetime debates on channels the external plurality is well maintained. The experts or guests called for the debates are experts in various fields. They come and put their opinion on any issue being discussed. During the debates, the guest and speakers called by the channels are experts on the issue being discussed and can explain the issue factually. However, they have also said that on paper, it seems like the plurality is maintained by the channels on debates as they have called subject experts, party spokespersons, and other experts, but if we see the qualitative aspects of these guests, then the image will change. The experts we see in these debates always put their opinion in hyper tone; their pitch and tempo are always high. The interviewees said the reason behind this is that it is a prerequisite from the channels. The experts who put their opinion slowly with data and facts and try to explain the concepts slowly are generally not called by the channels frequently. Channels only repeat those experts or guests on channels that can create hype and can counter to other panelists and give their support in building a heated debate. The respondents also said that the arguments and facts made by the anchors and experts during the discussion were irrelevant to the issue and that deviation from the issue is expected. The deviation from the issue is mainly seen when the anchor tries to

shift the direction of the debate to ideological propaganda. All the interviewees unanimously agreed that the ideological content and propaganda are visible in these debates. Instead, these debate shows function as a tool to spread such an agenda to the masses.

Discussion: Media Priming and Debate shows

Media Priming is the process of connecting constructs to the concepts in the viewers' memories. In priming, memory nodes connect one concept to another. While answering the questions related to the media priming in the debate, the respondents pointed out that priming is constantly visible on the primetime debate shows. They gave some examples from the debates to authenticate their opinion. One of the interviewees said that the way anchors and experts on the debate shows presented the issue of Tablighi Jamat was self-explanatory. We all saw how channels treated this issue during the first wave of Coronavirus. The channels associated the values like the reason for the virus in India was Tablighi Jamat, and we saw the repercussion in the society when the common masses stopped buying things from one people of one specific religion. They have also said that the increase in the violence against specific religion was expected after such TV coverage.

Another example was during the protest against the farm bills by the farmers. In a few channels, it was shown that the protesters have associated with some terrorist groups, and they are not protesting; instead, they are creating hindrance in the development of the real farmer of the country. During the verdict of the Ram Mandir also, the channels had run the programs like 'Kaha Banega Mandir' (where the temple will constituted), 'Kab Banega Mandir' (when temple will be constituted) 'Mandir se Judi Astha' (faith to the temple). These names and taglines of the programs are an association of the data and facts to the mental nodes of the viewers. This type of coverage creates an image for the viewers where they connect the data and facts

related to the issue (Ram Mandir) to the association and context given by the channels in their primetime debates. The interviewees also gave examples of how media has reshaped viewers' reality about the opposition parties and the ruling party. This reshaping of the reality was seen in the public discourse, where the common masses believed that in our country, opposition parties are not doing their part fairly. The respondents also gave one more example to authenticate the presence of media priming through primetime debate shows, and they said that for the first time in the country, the masses are supporting the Government irrespective of the increase in inflation. The respondents said that the common masses are supporting the decision of the Government to increase the price of Petrol and Diesel and quoting statements like 'Deshhit mei hum ye karenge' (we will support the Government as the Government is trying to protect us). Around 90% of them agreed that this is the most significant example of changing perception, which leads to change in the behavior and decisions of the viewers. They also said through this example, the mental connection of construct and concept could be understood as on primetime debates that the anchors and experts are defending the price hike and associating it to Ukraine and Russia War and the central Government's efforts to protect our borders.

Conclusion

The role of media, especially television news channels, in reshaping the realities for the viewers is well discussed and researched. Earlier, Agenda Setting theory also explained that media not only tell what to think but also what to think about. This function of media is instrumental in shaping the reality for the viewers for any issue they cover. Television debate shows are opinion-based programs where anchors or moderators discuss the 'big-news-of-the-day' with experts on the issue. This entire process of debates on television helps the viewers understand the issue

thoroughly and summarize the facts associated with it, ultimately leading to their own understanding of the issue. This understanding of the viewers can be seen in the behavior of the masses and their decision-making on specific issues.

The present research concludes that primetime debate shows on Indian news channels are distorting the parameters of the media treatment to apply priming so that viewers can see the entire image the way they have planned. It was also observed that in the primetime debates, objectivity was not visible, the parameters of plurality were also maintained on paper, and the channels were highly compromising on the quality of the experts and guests. The channels, 'prime the facts' and data used on their debate shows and connect the construct to the memory-nodes of the viewers. This allows them to alter the viewers' reality about the issue, and on the basis of this altered reality, they decide about the issues. Moderators or the anchors of the debate shows are highly crucial as they shape the flow of the debate. It was found that the moderators or the anchors of the primetime debate shows are experienced and have a good command over the language, but they also have slanted opinions on issues taken for the debates.

The anchors are biased in their conduct as they are not providing equal time to all the panelists. They use factors like name-calling, fear, and praising party policies to promote the set the agenda. The anchors are also using technology sometimes to stop the panelists from sharing their opinions on the issue of the discussion. The anchors or moderators generally interrupt the panelists when the expert's answer does not support the debate's bottom line set by the channel and the production team. To keep the track streamlined, an anchor needs to work hard as he/she will ask questions to the experts and move from one expert to another, but as per the data, anchors are also not true to this responsibility as well. They are not

putting any effort into keeping the debates on track, and the deviation from the issue discussed in debates is seen in almost all debates. The anchors are highly titled towards Government as their tone is docile and humble when they quote Government, whereas their tone is harsh and aggressive when they quote opposition parties in any facts during the discussion. This research concludes that in primetime debate shows, media priming is a common phenomenon, and anchors and experts are instrumental in achieving the set goals of priming. The impact of primed issues can be traced in society and is visible in the behavior patterns of the viewers. Media treatment of primetime debate shows is also not following the ethical guidelines of journalism and is lacking in maintaining the parameters of objectivity, plurality, fairness, and neutrality.

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