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How India's Media Landscape Changed Over Five Years

By: Sevanti Ninan

Mainstream media was delegitimised over the past five years by the BJP government. Co-option and self-censorship by this media have followed. Alongside, the use of social media has grown hugely, making the likes of Whatsapp powerful weapons in elections.

The five-year period of 2014-2019 has seen such an explosion of media creation and media use in India that the answer to the question, who is the media, has become, literally, everybody. The Indian public sphere is increasingly mediated not just by conventional media—TV, print, online, and radio in the hands of a few—but by technology in the hands of millions of users seeking information, pushing disinformation and instant gratification.

Many developments converged towards this end: the explosion of internet connectivity and cheap smartphones in small town and rural India, leading to growing numbers online and on social media. With 500 million Indians on the Internet by the end of 2018 (a growth of 65% over 2016), the acquisition of WhatsApp by Facebook in February 2014 and its accelerated growth in India thereafter has meant that the messaging app now has over 200 million users in India. There are over 30 million Twitter accounts and close to 294 million on Facebook. The 65% growth is partly explained by the launch of Reliance Jio in September 2016, the 4G telecom service of Reliance Industries which was free for six months. The [story](#) on *Economic Times* in 2018 of how the mobile phone was shaping up as the BJP's most important election weapon, reported that Jio's inaugural offer racked up 100 million subscribers in 170 days. Subsequently other telecom operators dropped tariffs in order to compete, helping to deepen Internet penetration.

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Between WhatsApp, Twitter and the Chinese short video creation platform TikTok, video-sharing of the good, bad and ugly has quickly become a national pastime. Access to media tools—a cheap smartphone with a camera, an online app on which you can edit your video — has become a marker of changing demography. The coming together of the communications revolution and the neo-middle class.

This has also led to the evolving of a strange Indian psyche where, if a coaching centre catches fire, passers-by now stop and shoot a video. When people lynch or rape they also shoot a video to record it.

And on a completely different plane, the victory of Narendra Modi witnesses a blossoming of [videos](#) on TikTok of ordinary young people celebrating his success. Eager young men and women thrusting their faces at the camera and saying “*Baki sab bakwas hai Modi sabse khas hai.*” (Modi is the best, the rest are rubbish). Celebrating themselves, as much as him. But even before his victory, TikTok was used to [circulate dialogues](#), speeches and sound bites from Modi on smartphones.

The widespread emergence of multiple media platforms including social media is redefining the role of the media in politics and government, and the relationship between the two. Given Narendra Modi's earlier history with the news media as chief minister, particularly with some elements of the English media following the 2002 riots, his prime ministership created a new template for media-government relations.

In the five years of the Modi-I regime, party and government operated on a simple formula: delegitimise existing media and create your own channels of communication with the voter and citizen.

De-legitimising mainstream media

Narendra Modi was elected in May 2014. In June [Scroll.in](#) reported that the Prime Minister had asked both senior bureaucrats and cabinet colleagues to refrain from speaking with journalists. When [surveyed](#) on whether the government had really clammed up, journalists covering government said cabinet notes and cabinet meeting agendas were no longer available, nor were inter-ministerial exchanges coming out.

The decision to shut down the Planning Commission and replace it with the NITI Aayog became known only when the Prime Minister announced it on Independence Day, though the decision was cleared by the cabinet two days before. Clearly there was neither a briefing nor a leak before that.

By August 2014 it became clear that only official media would accompany the Prime Minister on his trips abroad, breaking from past practice.

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The Indian Prime Minister became the forerunner of a US president who demonstrated the same preference in communication: Twitter over press interactions. Long before Donald Trump came along, Narendra Modi took to using his [Twitter handle](#), with more than 11 million followers, to convey day-to-day developments. Including big ones, such as the announcement that Barack Obama would be the chief guest on Republic Day. His tweets then became a source of news for the Delhi press. When ministers wanted to communicate, they too tweeted. Some every day.

Was Narendra Modi seeking to deny mainstream media its accountability role by refusing to engage with it, and making it amply clear to ministers that they need not do so either?

In September 2014 The Editors Guild of India issued a statement which said,

...By delaying the establishment of a media interface in the Prime Minister's Office, in restricting access to ministers and bureaucrats in offices and in reducing the flow of information at home and abroad, the government in its early days seems to be on a path that runs counter to the norms of democratic discourse and accountability.

Such statements cut little ice with the government of the day

Prime minister Modi also started a monthly radio programme, "Mann Ki Baat" on All India Radio, and the programme quickly began to drive stories in the press and on television.

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For the BJP, then, it has been a glorious five years of experimenting with different kinds of media management. Aided by a strong leader who, quite simply, changed the rules of media engagement. No press conferences, no "interviews" except to handpicked journalists, and those usually with pre-screened questions and (often) only written answers. He sidestepped critics and his government coopted entire media houses. The fallout has been increasing self-censorship on the one hand and pro-active defence of the government on the other.

The notion that the government needs mainstream media was made to stand on its head. It was the other way around. With major media houses given to holding sponsored events every year as a source of revenue, they needed the Prime Minister and ministers to speak at their events. If you displeased the government, participation was withdrawn.

The Times Group learnt that the hard way in March 2017. The Prime Minister, his ministers and bureaucrats, and Chandrababu Naidu (whose state was an official partner of the summit) all pulled out of the ET global summit at the last minute. There was much [speculation](#) as to the reasons, including government displeasure with the *Economic Times*' coverage of the Samajwadi Party leadership in the run-up to the UP elections.

A few months later that year the Times Group played ball when the BJP President filed his papers for the Rajya Sabha nomination. Stories in the Ahmedabad edition of the *Times of India* on his assets, as well as on Smriti Irani's educational qualifications, were [taken down](#) from the website hours after publication. The *DNA* newspaper published by Zee Media also took down their story.

A more drastic instance of the government leaning on a major newspaper came when the editor of the *Hindustan Times* resigned, in September 2017, just 14 months after joining the paper. The *Hindustan Times* had been running a “Hate Tracker” since July, which it described as “a national database on crimes in the name of religion, caste, race”. After the editor’s exit it was [taken down](#).

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Here too there was an annual event at stake. Speaking at the Hindustan Times Leadership Summit in November that year, the prime minister spoke about the many changes his government was bringing in the lives of ordinary people. And he wanted to know why the media was so [negative](#). The postscript to the whole episode came in May 2019 when the former editor in question, Bobby Ghosh, suggested in a [tweet](#) that his resignation had not been so voluntary after all, and that government pressure was involved.

Increased self-censorship

Over these five years, more than any time in the past, media houses in India (TV, print and online) discovered the virtues of self-censorship. Published news items disappeared from websites. TV channels dropped interviews or stories done by their correspondents. NDTV was exposed as a channel that had practised internal censorship during the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) regime as well. The entertainment channel Star Plus decide [not to air](#) a comedy act that mimicked Prime Minister Modi.

The resignation of the ABP anchor Punya Prasun Bajpai, according to [a piece](#) by him in *The Wire.in*, followed explicit instructions from the proprietor (presumably Arup Sarkar though Bajpai did not name him) to not mention Prime Minister Modi in his show “Masterstroke” or to even carry any pictures of him. Bajpai referred to one edition of the show which reported on farmers being forced to part with their land for an Adani power project.

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Giving a new spin to self-censorship, several prominent news outlets [took down](#) their published articles on the post-demonetisation bank deposits in an Ahmedabad-based bank in which BJP President Amit Shah was a director. The IANS news agency, which broke the story, however said that it was based on information obtained through the Right to Information (RTI) Act and they would not be retracting the story.



When the global media watchdog Reporters Without Borders put out an index of press freedom report which said that journalists were less free under the Modi government due to threats from Hindutva nationalists, the *Times of India* and *The Economic Times* were among those who later [took down](#) the report. The election of Amit Shah as BJP president in 2014 had also seen voluntary takedowns. The Mumbai daily *DNA* first published a piece on his past record titled "A new low in Indian politics" and [then removed it](#). And

Quartz reported on July 16, 2014, that after Shah's election, CNN IBN's bulletin at night as well as the graphics on air were edited to remove references to the criminal charges faced by him.

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However it is not only the ruling establishment that media owners are anxious to protect. There is some assiduous self-censorship on behalf of corporate India too. When the Sheena Bora murder case transfixed the country in the latter half of 2015, the multi-faceted coverage of the couple who had owned INX media was careful not to touch upon their earlier links with the Reliance group.

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The year 2017 kicked off with the *Indian Express* publishing in January its investigation into the Sahara-Birla papers, showing how the Income Tax Settlement Commission acted with alacrity in granting Sahara India immunity from prosecution on the basis of just three hearings.

Those named in these papers as recipients of payoffs included Shivraj Singh Chouhan, the chief minister of Madhya Pradesh; Raman Singh, the chief minister of Chhattisgarh; Narendra Modi when he was Gujarat chief minister; Shaina NC, the treasurer for the BJP in Maharashtra; and Sheila Dikshit, the former chief minister of Delhi. A total of over 100 politicians were mentioned between the two sets of papers. Blame the defamatory implications of reporting on all this for the fact that the response of the rest of the media was remarkably circumspect.

July 2017 saw the saga of the *Economic and Political Weekly* editor Paranjoy Guha Thakurta quitting his job after the Board of the Sameeksha Trust, which publishes the journal, asked for the takedown of a published investigation relating to Adani Power. More self-censorship. The company had sent a legal notice to EPW. Did any other publication try to see if this investigation had any merit and do a follow-up? No.

State governments also intimidate journalists successfully. In December 2015, Chennai saw unprecedented floods and the story had reporters converging there from media outlets across the country. Reporters from outside Tamil Nadu covering the floods discovered the self-censorship that prevails in the state. Officials wouldn't answer questions at press conferences, they read out statements invoking Amma (chief minister J. Jayalalithaa) every now and then. Journalists said their papers would have defamation cases filed against them if they were critical of the state government.

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This prime minister more than his predecessors is on record questioning media credibility, and accusing the media of being oppositional. In his pre-election interview this year to the *Indian Express*, he articulated succinctly why he thinks the institution is not credible:

Uncomfortable questions must be asked. It is my belief that criticism must happen, not allegations. Like you must ask some questions to us (government) for the sake of democracy, similar probing questions should be asked to others also for democracy. Isn't it? This is my quarrel. It was a remote-control government for 10 years. How many press conferences did you ask for from those holding the remote control? An illegal institution was created which could overrule the PM. Did you ask them about democracy? Questions like what you are asking me?

Murder, attacks, trolling, co-option, fake news

De-legitimation is also achieved by threats and violence. Gauri Lankesh was murdered in September 2017 for being a critic of right wing extremism, an unprecedented act of silencing, the chilling effect of which still endures. *Scroll.in* correspondent Malini Subramaniam's house was attacked in Jagdalpur in 2016, a petrol bomb was hurled at the house of Patricia Mukhim, the *Shillong Times* editor, last year.

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This period has seen trolling and attacking of media personalities seen as oppositional by the ruling party. In May 2019 NDTV ran an [entire programme](#) on the vicious attacks and death threats received by the chief editor of NDTV India, Ravish Kumar, over a long period. Women journalists who are seen as independent or have done exposes on the ruling party or the government during these five year have faced [vicious trolling](#).



The ultimate de-legitimation of the media as an institution however comes from co-option by the ruling establishment. During the first tenure of the NDA government led by the BJP this has been particularly true of television, with a host of channels—Zee News, India TV, Republic TV, Times Now, among others—turning openly partisan. There are enough examples of this on YouTube to prove the point.

Times Now's anchors are almost comical in the high dudgeon they display in studios night after night in response to criticism of the government by the political opposition or by studio guests. Invite someone to speak and then berate her or him vociferously. And it is the channel's former anchor Arnab Goswami, who tested the winnability of an anti-liberal editorial stance during his stint with the Times Group and went on to found a commercially successful news channel, Republic TV, that redefined news to be structured around real or manufactured controversies, one for each day's prime time show. This channel also uses its shows to heckle other journalists for criticizing Narendra Modi and his government.

Finally fake news videos about journalists are painstaking constructed and circulated, presumably by the BJP's IT cell army, using archival footage from channels such as NDTV. The one on Tiranga TV's Barkha Dutt, for instance, goes to some trouble to pull out footage related to all the controversies associated with Dutt's coverage, going back to the Kargil war and the Pandit exodus in Kashmir, to try and establish her anti-national record over decades.

All of this energetic media management is unprecedented.

The BJP creates its own media

Enormous energy has gone into creating media to suit the party's purpose. First in order to win the 2014 election, then re-election in 2019, and in-between a number of state elections. Also in order to shape the media narrative for the NDA government.

Election-time amplification of Modi's image and message has led to different experiments in 2014 and 2019. Narendra Modi's projection using 3D Hologram Technology was first experimented with in Ahmedabad in 2012 and deployed in 2014 for his Bharat Vijay rallies across the country. Accompanied by the creation of an online army to promote the candidate and party.

The 2019 campaign was powered by an indefatigable media machine described in this [Time Magazine report](#) on how Whatsapp was fuelling fake news ahead of the elections.

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There was also the more audacious experiment with [NaMo TV](#) launched on 31st March 2019, just days before the polling schedule got under way. It was a YouTube channel which simply telecast repeats of Modi's rallies and speeches 24x7, was carried on DTH platforms and defied the regulation that cable and satellite platforms could only carry licensed channels. Complaints to the Election Commission from other parties got nowhere, and NaMo TV promoted Modi through every phase of polling, cocking a snook at the Model Code of Conduct of the Election Commission, which could not decide whether it was a violation or not.

Meanwhile the Tata Sky CEO told NDTV it was a special services channel. And that they were getting the feed from the Bharatiya Janata Party. (If this is true, no rule was broken)

There has been single-minded [messaging](#), using mobile phones and social media, helping to reshape the relationship between media and the practice of politics. Amit Malviya, head of the BJP's IT Cell, [was predicting](#) in an interview to the *Economic Times* in August 2018 that the upcoming elections would be fought on the mobile phone. He said they would be "WhatsApp elections".

The Karnataka elections in 2018 were a trial run, the *Economic Times* article noted, with BJP party workers and social media volunteers creating anywhere between 23,000 and 25,000 WhatsApp groups for their outreach. What the outreach sent out was carefully crafted propaganda videos discrediting the Opposition, as also messaging that would mobilise the vote. All of this masterminded by an IT cell begun in 2012 which has the twin goals of image building and image destruction.

Its functioning is described [here](#) and [here](#). Its top 150 paid social media influencers -- hired by PR companies according to an insider --photographed with the prime minister at various times, included trolls. And constitute the ruling party's Twitter army. Some of the influencers run Facebook pages which manufacture fake news, as the two video links above describe.

Media investigations done in the course of this election came up with evidence on how some of the WhatsApp groups created [Islamophobia](#), and how a women's rights NGO was turned into a secret BJP [propaganda machine](#). At one place the article on Islamophobia links to Amit Shah in Kota in Rajasthan telling the social media volunteers of his party that they have the capacity to change the atmosphere of the 2019 election.

The rise of independent alternative media

The same five-year period which has seen the changes described above has also seen a significant rise in independent media, most of it online, several offering specialized content.

The rise in fake news has led to the advent of fake news busters. This five-year period has seen the birth and growth of a fact checking industry, triggered primarily by the advent of WhatsApp. SMHoaxSlayer started out as a Facebook page in August 2015, seeking to verify social media hoaxes related to religion, politics and scams. BOOM launched its fake news busting and fact checking initiative in November 2016, and has a WhatsApp helpline. AltNews launched in February 2017.

There is enough fake news being generated to keep them all busy. On the day election results were announced, 23 May 2019, Nieman Lab pulled together information from various sources to put out a [newsletter](#) on fake news in the Indian elections. One assertion made was that more than a quarter of the content shared by the BJP and a fifth of the content shared by the Indian National Congress was junk news. This came from Oxford's [Project](#) on Computational Propaganda which sampled and studied WhatsApp groups for visual content shared.

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The niche media landscape has also been enriched by several other sites. *The Ken* came up in Bangalore as a digital, subscription-driven business news offering, as did the data journalism venture *IndiaSpend*. *Mongabay India* focuses on conservation and environmental science news.

Region-specific news sites have blossomed. *The News Minute*, a digital news platform which has a specific focus on the five southern states, began publishing in 2014, and *Dool News*, headquartered in Kozhikode in Kerala, is a Malayalam digital news site that covers politics and societal issues. *Azhimukham* is another Malayalam news portal. Then there is *Samachara.com* in Karnataka, which classifies itself as an independent digital news media.

Many of these have benefitted from a new trend of corporate philanthropy funding independent media. That has enabled individual journalists from the mainstream to break away and set up their own journalism ventures. *The Wire.in*, *The Print* and the *East Mojo*, headquartered in Gauhati, come in this category.

Along with several others begun earlier, such as *Newslick*, *Scroll.in*, *Huffpost India*, and *NewsLaundry* as well as *The Caravan*, which does long-form narrative journalism, they constitute a dogged counter to co-option, self-censorship, fake news and much else. But the new online independent media publications remain small ventures that enrich the public sphere but lack the share of voice of the mainstream.

Given the altered landscape, where should the pushback to the BJP's media management juggernaut come from?

The first recognition has to be of a newly empowered citizenry that is generating its own media. Beyond targeting them with aggressive tweets during the election, political parties and citizenry have to strategise their communication for the mobile phone connected generation of all economic strata. Schools and colleges need to offer more media literacy.

Civil society and the more thoughtful sections of English and regional media need to lend more heft to efforts to counter fake news. Do we have the laws to deal with this phenomenon? If courts cases are being filed by individuals under horrific attack what becomes of them? Do they get support from the legal community and their media compatriots?

More people need to simply recognize the much enlarged landscape that the media has become.

(This article has evoked some responses which can be read [here](#))