

BOOK EXCERPT

A journey towards delegitimisation

With its already flawed inner structure and political linkages, Hindi media became more wary of exercising editorial freedom post 2014

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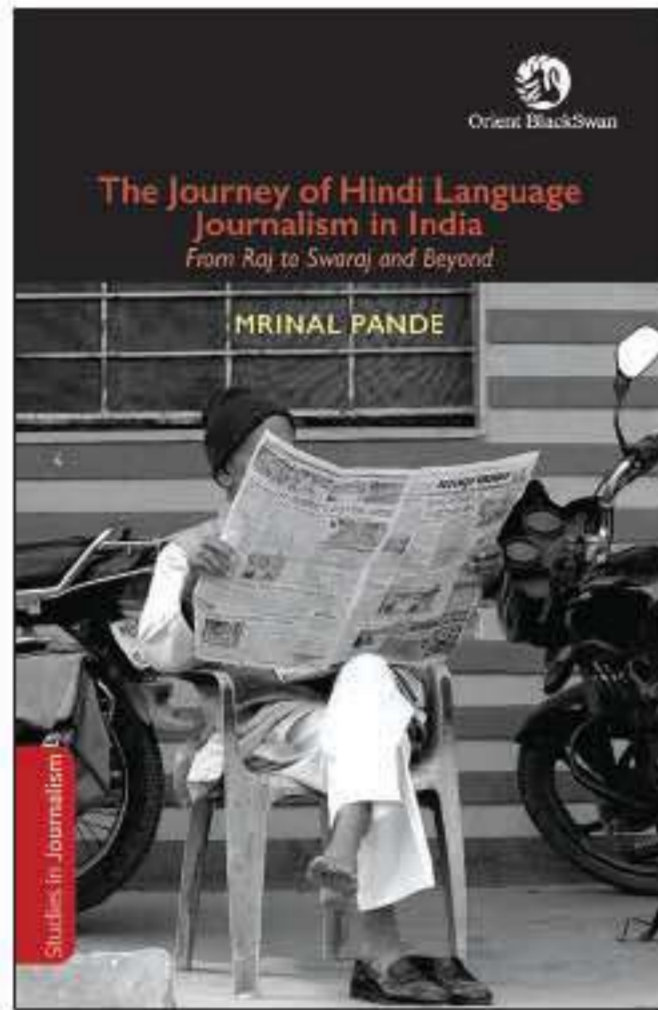
The 2014 election as a game changer

An election is where the varying economic interests of rural and urban India, and the ruling political party and its opponents collide. This resulted, in 2014, in a series of sudden quakes releasing dangerous levels of subterranean heat and energy. The commercial advertisers, on whose ratings the edifice of media had come to rest, and the political party, with its capacity for producing vast advertising revenues, swung into action. Since 2014, old media hands have seen an undeniable growth in numbers of embedded journalists in most media organisations. Ironically, the new government aggressively promoted Hindi as India's only potential *rashtra bhasha* (national language), but with its already flawed inner structure, docile editorials and political linkages, Hindi media became even more wary of exercising editorial autonomy. The recent freezing of vital government advertising for three English dailies (see *Reuters* 2019), with a combined readership of over 26 million, allegedly as retaliation for their critical stances on several major decisions of the government, further underscored to the multi-media Hindi publishers that it was best to support the government in all matters and be happy with the unsurprisingly large growth in their numbers and annual revenues. Most major Hindi dailies meekly accepted the official versions of events handed to them by government functionaries, to the near exclusion of all other viewpoints.

Hindi's multi-media owner-editors

India has long debated the issue of media monopolies and cross-media ownership. During the early years after Independence, the 'jute press' was criticised often by political leaders. This was a clear reference to big media groups like the Hindustan Times Group and the Times Group, both of whose owners were businessmen and jute barons. Similarly, the ownership of steel plants by a few influential media barons led occasionally to derisive references to the dominance of the 'steel press'. Soon, pressure built up to frame laws preventing large media monopolies.

With 22 recognised Indian languages and fast proliferating segments in print, digital media, radio and television, the mediascape in India has presented a complex scenario. By the 1970s, most major



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media entities had come to be variously owned and controlled either by individuals or by various trusts, societies and corporate bodies. According to the findings of the Media Ownership Monitor (MOM) report, four major dailies in Hindi—*Dainik Jagran*, *Hindustan Dainik*, *Amar Ujala* and *Dainik Bhaskar*—today control 76.45 per cent of the total readership for Hindi papers nationally (Reporters without Borders and DataLEADS 2019a). All four are owned in large part by the families of the original founders. All have, by now, acquired an impressive array of other media platforms in the digital world. This provides them with a clear advantage over other vernaculars and enormous economic clout and political leverage in the 11 states of the Hindi belt. By the first decade of the new millennium, large TV and broadcast networks began acquiring/partnering with regional players. Then came the realisation that in the years to come, the scope for multi-media expansion is going to be far bigger in Indian languages, particularly in Hindi.

TRAI and questions about cross-media ownership

Fearing the loss of healthy heterogeneity and fair competition in the media market, in February 2009, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) advised the government that necessary safeguards were needed to ensure plurality and diversity in print, radio and television. This

advice was vociferously questioned by media owners in the publications and TV channels they owned. It was said that if restrictions were imposed on cross-media ownership, the multiplicity and growth of the media would be badly impacted. The pro-cross-media ownership lobby also said the market in India was too diverse to allow media monopolies to come up. A little later, in July 2009, another 200-page report was submitted by the Administrative Staff College of India (ASCI) to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. This report recommended the strict implementation of laws preventing cross-media ownership to ward off market dominance by a few corporates with diverse interests in sectors like steel, aviation, hotels, cement, education, and automobiles (Guha Thakurta, 2012a).

The implementation of the report was hotly resisted by big players in the field. Their boards gradually all but eliminated journalists and brought in investment bankers, venture capitalists, chartered accountants, corporate lawyers, retailers and representatives of major companies who were also big advertisers. This, as the TRAI feared, led to many questionable dealings and a confusion of priorities in all branches of the media.

According to a comprehensive report on such unfair practices by senior journalist Paranjay Guha Thakurta (2012b), our weak to non-existent laws on cross-media ownership had led to a scenario where a few mega-companies and corporations dominated the market, and media pluralism as we had known it was fast evaporating. Aided by global trends, ownership of print, radio, TV and websites across various regions and languages had also begun feeding and fattening these oligopolies that protected, supported and networked closely with each other, and went on to be represented in the most important media bodies.

At such a juncture, to bring in transparency, Reporters without Borders and DataLEADS launched Media Ownership Monitor—an ex-

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A vendor selling newspapers and magazines in Mumbai

Photo: Getty Images

tensive, openly available database that tracks the ownership of media houses in India. Using the 2018 data from the Registrar of Newspapers in India, they show that India is one of the biggest media markets in the world. In 2018, India had 118,239 registered publications (38,000 weekly newspapers, 36,564 monthly magazines and 17,160 dailies). It also had 880 satellite channels, 550 FM and community radio stations and over 380 news channels. The only news radio station, All India Radio, remained a government monopoly. By January 2019, they had evaluated 58 media outlets—25 print, 23 TV outlets, 9 websites and 1 radio station. The ownership of all these rested in 39 companies and 45 individual owners (Reporters without Borders and DataLEADS 2019c). One of the key findings of the report is:

Within the sample of this study, as many as ten media owners have direct or indirect links with politics while some of them even represent a political party. There are countless others however, who have refused to declare their political affiliations, but yet own media companies. Between them, media owners with political links control a sizeable share of viewership/readership.

Paid insertions: News that dare not speak its name

It would be churlish to blame the government of the day for putting the squeeze on the media. The truth about Indian media's increasing reliance on revenues generated by news that has been paid for has been debated since the late

Prabhash Joshi raised it. He was followed by an explosive report on the phenomenon of paid news by Guha Thakurta (2012b). But the subject remained shrouded in half-truths, corporate denials and misleading information. In 2013, when the Anna Andolan was at its peak, the city supplement of one of the biggest multi-edition Hindi dailies in India carried a whole page of classified advertising that extended support for the fasting Anna Hazare and his men. Smiling engagingly in ads, leaders from small-town and rural India could be seen in the classified section, extending their heartfelt support to Hazare's cause, nestling cosily next to ads for reducing fat, increasing male potency and height. Almost all the ads carried the mugshots and phone numbers of those who had paid for the insertions (one was even wearing a 'Main Anna hoon' [I am Anna] T-shirt). Close examination revealed the advertisers to be local builders, heads of charitable religious trusts, educational bodies, regional organisations for migrant workers from Bihar, social workers heading various *sanghs* (guilds) and *sangathans* (organisations) to save India ('Bharat bachao'), and various resident welfare associations. This was the beginning of the re-feudalisation of Hindi media.

Censorship, self-censorship and gradual delegitimisation

Between 2014 and 2019, as media creation and media use grew explosively, the government and its agencies began strategising on how to use the multiple media platforms now available to millions in India. Inexpensive internet connectivity and the steady expansion of social media between 2016 and 2018 led to a 65 per cent growth in media, whose users numbered 500 million (Narayanan and Pradhan, 2016). Then Facebook (with 294 million Indian accounts already in existence) acquired popular messaging service WhatsApp in 2014, adding 200 million more users.

When Reliance launched its 4G telecom services, the resultant tariff war deepened internet penetration even more.

Between 2014 and 2019, the Indian media began to experience a new kind of media management. In 2014, the World Hindi Conference was launched with great fanfare in Bhopal, the capital of Hindi-speaking Madhya Pradesh. The organisers took care not to invite eminent Hindi intellectuals, several of whom had been recipients of major awards, on the grounds that they had, in the past, proved to be rather aggressive contrarians. At a session on Hindi media, students from the local college of journalism were similarly dissuaded from attending. The stated reason was that the session was to apprise party workers of how the Hindi media functions on the ground. One of the chief organisers of the Hindi festival of letters was a retired general who was then a minister of state. He told the media that most journalists and writers were likely to misbehave, and used the pejorative 'presstitute' for the combative representatives of the media. Since then, every minister for information and broadcasting and the prime minister himself have repeatedly questioned the adversarial media's credibility.

Within that kind of atmosphere, a slow but dangerous delegitimisation of the mainstream media is emerging. The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) no longer holds the usual pressers and a stop has been put to the age-old practice of allowing a posse of journalists on the prime ministerial plane, so that while he is travelling abroad, he can informally, and if he wishes, individually, talk with senior media representatives. The members of the Central cabinet too maintain a studied distance from the mainstream media. The prime minister prefers to bypass the media and speak directly to the public in rallies and through weekly addresses in his *Mann Ki Baat* broadcast on the state-owned All India Radio. ■