

## 24x7 news or frivolous debates and propaganda?

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Thirty years ago, there was only one television channel in India, Doordarshan. Back then, if we wanted TV news, we had to turn on Doordarshan at pre-decided times. Every so often, discerning viewers felt a need for independent news bulletins. Nowadays, in the internet era, almost every self-proclaimed journalist has a 24x7 channel.

### Non-stop commercials

Television channels have two types of advertisements. One is called the commercial. Commercials are themselves of two kinds. One is called commercial break. They surface between two ostensibly serious programmes. Every 15-minute telecast incorporates a three-minute commercial break. Therefore, the total duration of commercial breaks in a 24-hour telecast is slightly below five hours!

The second type of commercials run concurrently with other programmes. Then, the TV screen looks like a philistine collage of confusing displays, moving in all directions with different velocities. Some pop up one moment and vanish the next,

abruptly, as in a magic show!

The second kind of advertisements is self-promotion – declaration of their own channel rank based on some unknown, perhaps hypothetical, surveys. Some channels declare the upcoming programmes in their headlines. The allocated programme now gets restricted to barely 30-40% of the TV screen!

### Frivolous debates, bookshelf backgrounds

All 24x7 news channels spend a substantial amount of airtime on so-called debates, irrespective of whether there is a debatable issue or not. Many debates are anchored by impolite, aggressive, and arrogant people who seem to derive pleasure by insulting their guests. Some anchors are experts in all subjects from politics to science, economics to medicine, art to education, sports and what have you.

Many programmes are titled as "The Right Stand", "India's Agenda", "Frankly Speaking". As if these anchors decide the country's agenda by 'frankly' discussing and taking the 'right' position. One channel screams, for instance, "Who is leading Delhi's Corona Fight – Amit Shah or



Arvind Kejriwal?" – politicising a non-issue. Then there are programmes with audacious titles such as "Decoding China's Global Design". They fail to understand that such a topic requires elaborate global research by a collaboration of acclaimed scholars.

Several 'journalists' deliberately indulge in verbal fights, in obnoxiously high decibels, with anyone with a different point of view by arbitrarily changing the topic, bringing in extraneous issues and blaming everybody else other than the ones that they worship as their political masters.

"The nation wants to know" debates are annoyingly frivolous. Ill-informed partic-

ipants keep looking at their mobiles nervously waiting, perhaps, for a prompt from their 'WhatsApp University' friends. "I am coming, I am coming..." – frequently heard for questions begging a crisp answer – after monotonous narration of unconnected or wrong history dating back several decades.

Then there are the "I do not know much about the topic, but..." type participants. High decibel cacophony continues for the entire duration – multiple speakers speak simultaneously. Their backgrounds are decorated with bookshelves with tightly stacked books that look long untouched.

### News or propaganda?

News is of least priority, both in quality and quantity. Headlines and stories, even in prime time, are so very diverse as though the channels are from different worlds, filled with opinions of political leaders, allowing longer airtime to their favourites, showing long footages of press conferences and campaign speeches.

They invent disappointingly ludicrous phrases (Dragon Border Dare, RaGa, NaMo, etc.) to deliberately mislead viewers. Some unhesitatingly spread fake

news.

Headlines and "breaking news" displays travel in all directions in various font sizes – they look like running arrows in battle scenes from TV serials Ramayana and Mahabharata. With a debate or newscast, three more stories appear simultaneously; one on top of the screen, and two at the bottom. They arrive and depart incessantly, traversing in different paths. Besides, at least two posters occupy a large part of the screen concurrently. Consequently, 60-70% of the screen is engulfed with exhibits unrelated to the main programme.

On-field reporters report their interpretations. Their questions to a passer-by or pre-selected interviewee are ridiculously stupid.

They ask a daughter who is mourning her mother's death, "How are you feeling now, ma'am?" They ask a politician about migrant labourers walking hundreds of miles back home, "What is your take on that?" They ask a destitute farmer, "Aap sarkar se kya chahtey hay? (What do you want from the government?)" They ask the CEO of a company who has donated for a natural calamity, "Why is the well-being of people good for business, in general?"

They ask a top political leader, "Does your party function democratically?"

The sartorial indulgence of the anchors ranges from unknown ethnic styles to ultra-modern western fashion, competing with celebrities. This happens more often when they visit, on a most expensive-looking motorbike or a car, some never-visited village to report from ground zero. The villagers look intimidated by their presence. Their bewilderment knows no bounds when they encounter the most idiotic questions of their life from these aliens.

Some senior journalists act like "Messiahs", seemingly suffering from the Atlas Syndrome. They self-delegate themselves with the task of "uncluttering" the news and giving a "complete picture", as if viewers are ignorant fools. Their selection of issues for "uncluttering" is guided by their affinity towards a political leader.

From the viewers' perspective, considering the commercial breaks and the concurrent advertisements together, these news outlets have metamorphosed into non-stop commercials with a smidgen of shoddy debates and an apology of news.

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