

# News, Literacy and Public Policy: Changing Modes and Perceptions of Policy Literacy

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This paper seeks to study the changing relationship between news and public policies. It would address the changing modes of reporting along with changes in different strands in public policy, its instruments and actors. Conventional literature in the field provides a broader perspective related to news and public policy. It is claimed that "relationship between news coverage and the evolution of public policy is extremely circular," especially in regard to "who influences whom". The journalistic field may presume public policy as function of news, whereas, policymakers may assume otherwise, public policies make news. Finally, the paper argues that impact of media "matter, not just at the beginning but throughout the policy process." Hence, the study merits attention both at theoretical as well as substantive levels to problematize the relationship in Indian context.

**Keywords:** Public policy, media governance, new media, literacy, citizen-stakeholders

Scholarly discourses on Media and Public policy broadly posit three dominant strands to study the interlinkages between News and Public policy: (i) "as an agent of representative democracy", in which it is treated as "an object of policy formation", giving priority to the governmental sphere of regulations (ii) "as an object of commodification", giving priority to ownership control and advertisers with readers as consumers; and (iii) "as an object of public opinion", giving priority to discourses on social issues in the 'public sphere', with news audience as citizens.<sup>1</sup> However, challenges for news are not only in the fair reporting of public policy, but also in communicating the diverse narratives on policies. We argue that changes in ideology underlying public policies find reflection in the media narratives with the help of identifying distinguishing features that differentiate news pertaining to public policies; and argue that the mediation of public policies is influenced by such distinctions.

## Public Policy and News

Public Policy—a social, cultural, economic, political construct originating with state institutions – is central to organization of societies, because it balances competing interests, power equations, claims on resources, concessions, rights and obligations; and is expected to mitigate inequality. Legitimacy, power and accuracy are features of a good policy decision process<sup>2</sup>. In news coverage of the public policy making process, media would definitely look for the legitimacy of the process, on not only whether the institutions involved or being consulted in the policy process are the legitimate institutions invested

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with powers under the Constitutional or statutory scheme; but in addition, on whether the process has been sanctified through consultations with all those who are stakeholders or likely to be affected by the policy or the absence of it. Audience would equally be concerned on whether the institutions are free from or under any external influence or faced with any conflicts of interest in exercise of the legitimate powers; on whether the process is being swayed by any internal lobby or internal groups interested in tilting the process or the outcomes thereof in favour of one or other interests that gain from the proposed policy or saved from the losses owing to the proposed policy or benefits from delaying or stalling making policy decision.

Audience in the capacity of citizen-stakeholders are concerned about the reasons for which the elected government introduces a policy; about the manner in which Parliament debates and votes in favour or against the policy proposal; about whether the mandated processes for formulating the policy are followed or not. There may be non-citizen stakeholders as well – for example, the federating States are important stakeholders in national policies in India, and therefore interested in whether they are consulted prior to important decision<sup>3</sup>. Such information convinces the reader about the sanctity or otherwise of the policy decision, and contributes to the construction of public opinion about the elected government.

A public policy is arrived at through political and administrative processes; and is the outcome of competing demands on resources at the disposal of the society—human resources, natural resources, financial resources, technological resources, and so on. Governments are obliged to strike the optimal balance between conflicting interests of gainers of a policy decision in one sector, with the losers in another sector owing to the same policy decision. The beneficiaries of public policies are both public in general – public interest and national interest – as well as specific groups and in extreme cases individual beneficiaries in the garb of public interest. For example, in the ‘first come first serve’ policy of allocation of natural resources can be public interest to benefit consumers, because high prices in auctions can result in higher consumer prices. Equally, such a policy can be criticized for sub-serving crony-capitalism, and therefore allocation through competitive auctions to be transparent, efficient and in the public interest. Media’s role in the public discourse on policy needs to be timely. In India, it has been found that “debate has occurred after policy-making, instead of before”<sup>4</sup>.

## Public Policy as News

Policy communities and governments, receive feedback from media narratives. News may also credit, or discredit, policy makers for policy outcomes; and sometimes substantive policy issues may get neglected or underplayed due to overemphasis on personalities.<sup>5</sup> The public policy agenda may be congruent, or in conflict with the media or news agenda.

It is equally possible that in the transaction between news and public policy, it is not news that fails or succeeds; but on the contrary it is public policy that fails to encourage social participation. This is where the public relations offices in governments or corporates come into play on the assumption that public opinion “must be organized for the press ....and not by the press.”<sup>6</sup> However, such an approach has been criticized as the sovereign’s concern for controlling public opinion through “the manufacture of consent.”<sup>7</sup> Even though professional journalists would never admit to becoming unsuspecting tools in the hands of ‘spin doctors’;<sup>8</sup> yet, it is acknowledged that “political spin-doctoring is a growth industry,” which “involves hype making, geared towards taming mass publics and managing public opinion for policy elites”<sup>9</sup>. It is also found that there is a “growing reliance of news media

on Public Relations copy which increasingly helps to shape and inform journalists' editorial."<sup>10</sup>

All public policies are political decisions; however, all political decisions are not necessarily in the nature of public policies. Therefore, the features of public policy news coverage may be distinct in comparison to other political news coverage. It is not surprising that various dimensions of political power are embedded in public policies, which are after all political decisions, and therefore it is reasonable to expect public policies to impact, and be influenced as well, by different levels of social and political structure, because "(T)he structure of the state is an important determinant of political power."<sup>11</sup>

The State's position is dilemmatic. It has to support news media in the public interest – subsidized postal fee for registered newspapers and journals, subsidized spectrum allocation and advertisement support, are examples. Advertisement in the print and electronic media is intended "to create awareness among the people about various policies, programmes and achievements of the Government and advertising is an integral part of dissemination of information, which is essential in a democracy."<sup>12</sup> Even though the purpose of releasing government advertisements may not be to provide "financial assistance" to newspapers, but, "to secure the widest possible coverage of the intended content or message"<sup>13</sup>, occasionally assistance package may get extended;<sup>14</sup> even if such relief may not be "practically" utilized by newspapers/publishers.<sup>15</sup> According to industry estimates, the advertising spending in India is expected to touch Rs. 49000 in 2015, of which print would account for 34%, television for 45.8% and digital media, which is growing @ 12.8%, is estimated to account for 9.51% of all advertising spending<sup>16</sup>. The advertising spending by governments of the states and the centre is not insubstantial, the central government alone spent an estimated Rs. 1200 crore, with half of it on print media during 2013;<sup>17</sup> and it is estimated that "the newspaper industry has been hit by the drop in government ad spending."<sup>18</sup>

In understanding the manner of intersection between public policy and news, it is inevitable that the analyst considers all stakeholders. Journalists, both in their individual role as well as in their collective role as members of news gathering teams or newsroom teams, are important stakeholders in news, who are expected to be "serious conveyors and interpreters of what is going on in the world"<sup>19</sup>. Their social and educational backgrounds, individual ideological proclivities, sense of integrity, and expertise or prior exposure, are all important cultural influences in the making of news. Indeed, the proclivity to frame, prime or set agenda could be related to such influences. Similarly, the journalist as a member of a collective or team in a media organization can be influenced by the ethical norms as may be laid down under Section 13(1) of the Press Council Act, 1978<sup>20</sup> and which may be required to be followed by all members of the team or by the organization, peer group pressures, values acquired and imbibed as a result of training, institutional practices or standards followed in news gathering and news writing; and to limited extent economic interests of the group – for example, when writing about policies pertaining to wages and employment terms of journalists.

## Public Policy News as CSR of Media Organizations

Corporate Social Responsibility for media organizations can have at least five dimensions – the responsibility of being mindful of the impact of the news content it carries; the responsibility of being ethical in how it sources news; the responsibility to strike the right balance between demand for transparency and right to privacy of subjects; the responsibility to remain committed towards diversity issues in news coverage, including

newsroom-diversity; the responsibility of remaining alert towards exerting peer-pressure on other media organizations; and the responsibility to protect editorial autonomy and fair reporting<sup>21</sup>. With increasing competition for space/airtime between news and commercial/advertisement sections, and also, unfortunately, competition for space between news as traditionally defined on one side and the phenomenon of “paid news”<sup>22</sup> on the other, coverage of public policy pronouncements runs the risk of renegeing on its CSR. The menace of paid news is symptomatic of the buckling of the editorial before the commercial. This has led even a Chairperson of the Press Council of India to concede that the “failure of editors to maintain editorial independence was partly responsible for paid news creeping into the media. It was, of course, a part of the larger picture of the affluent sections getting into what has become media business”<sup>23</sup>. In a market place of ideas, it is difficult for a public good like public policy news to compete with paid news. Therefore, a challenge in the discharge of this media CSR is to deliver accurate news coverage of public policies, which impact the public at large, with optimal brevity driven by economic opportunity cost considerations of alternative utility of space.

The major challenge for fair reporting of public policy as news is to remain uninfluenced by advertisers – whether Governments, or the business or industry or other exogenous influences by lobbies with stakes in the policy. Similarly, news should not be dominant coverage of any particular ideology-based political arguments; or be biased in sourcing convenient ‘experts’ or ignoring inconvenient experts<sup>24</sup>. Relying on reporting on the Vietnam war,<sup>25</sup> on reporting of the leftist student movements,<sup>26</sup> and reporting of the Palestinian conflict<sup>27</sup> - it has been argued that “(I)n news reporting, it is impossible to avoid those biases: (T)hey start with media owners’ views and interests, then continue with the backgrounds, views, and value judgments of the journalists; their depiction of sources, locations, stories, and vocabulary; the positioning of the camera; the medium in which the story is told; the dissemination channels; and finally the different perceptions and views of the audiences.”<sup>28</sup> So much so that, it is even conceded that media “biases are actually an essential part of modern conflicts.”<sup>29</sup> News bias in reporting of public policies could also be due to “implicit and unacknowledged absorption”<sup>30</sup> of public policy in news reporting. Such ‘absorption’ may be difficult to avoid, when the ‘editorial’ arm of the media is increasingly forced to play the second fiddle to ‘business’ arm<sup>31</sup>; and “with the relative decline of the editor or his equivalent, and the growing importance of the business departments.”<sup>32</sup>

What internal pressures possibly work in the newsroom situation in the coverage of public policies? Even though there is no Indian literature on the impact of the lack of newsroom- diversity on news generally, an empirical study<sup>33</sup> has pointed to poor newsroom diversity in the mainstream media at the national level in Delhi. If international literature<sup>34</sup> on the issue of impact of newsroom diversity on news output or bias is any indication, there is no reason to believe that public policy news could be any exception, even though the degree of bias may depend on the social and cultural experiences carried to the newsroom by journalists and editorial staff.

## Effects of News Coverage on Public Policies

Due to its critical role in information distribution, news can impact public policies. For example, using data on agriculture policy as well as on media markets from 69 countries, a World Bank study found that “public support for agriculture is affected by the mass

media”; and in particular, “an increase in media (television) diffusion is associated with policies that benefit the majority to a greater extent”<sup>35</sup>. The study also found that “increased competition in commercial media reduces transfers to special interest groups and contributes to more efficient public policies.”<sup>36</sup> At one level, the study could be used to support the argument for ‘marketplace of ideas’, due to the evidence about the efficacy of competition in media. It is open to doubt, however, whether such competition, by itself – without any conscious ‘priming’, ‘framing’ or ‘agenda setting’ on the part of competing media in its role as ‘policy analysts’ – could lead to efficient policies.

The concept of ‘agenda setting’ assumes that there is a strong correlation between the emphasis that media places on certain issues and the importance attributed to those issues by the readership or audience. Through placement of the news<sup>37</sup>, through meager or extensive coverage, through the strong or weak wording of headlines, or through attribution by carefully selected or omitted ‘experts’,<sup>38</sup> media can emphasize or de-emphasize one or more issues relating to the public policy under coverage.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, news coverage of public policies are also prone to ‘framing’,<sup>40</sup> – that is, to the selection of any particular aspect of an issue for reporting, in preference to the others; or by defining a problem in a particular manner in preference to others. Interpretation of the causes of an issue, its moral evaluation, recommendation or treatment of the public policy in a news story – are all instances of ‘framing’ of news<sup>41</sup>. A similar argument can be made about the media ‘priming’ public policy news, by using specific issues as a standard for evaluating governments and its policies<sup>42</sup>.

The news ‘agenda’ and subsequent discourse in the media, in respect of the controversy surrounding extant policy of the allocation of coal blocks, to power, steel, cement and other industries, without competitive bidding, is a good example to illustrate the point.<sup>43</sup> The news item referred to the “allocation of 2G spectrum and licences”, which had already been in the news for more than a year at the time. This enabled the ‘framing’ of the news as one of implied ‘corruption’. Further, the process of criminal prosecution of the alleged accused in the controversial allocation of 2G spectrum, which was already being widely covered by the Indian media at the time, helped in ‘priming’ the audience. What was interesting was that the news regarding “presumptive losses” was based on a ‘leaked’ Draft Report, whereas the final report of the Comptroller and Auditor General was months away in the matter of coal – an example of inducing audience what to think about (loss to public exchequer due to allocation of coal under the prevalent public policy), how to think (loss to exchequer implied to be due to corruption owing to non-transparent allocation) and to think against a standard (parallel with the losses and level of corruption in 2G spectrum allocation). Media effects on public policies do get limited, in reality, by several factors – prior knowledge possessed by the audience, is one such factor. The audience may also be wary of bias and influences, particularly ideological influences, in the news coverage of public policies.

Another example – the conflicting public interest involved in respect of a non-communicative disease like cancer and, say, a policy of ban on tobacco or the adverse impact of such a policy on tobacco farmers. The news could be ‘framed’ on the premise of public health<sup>44</sup> or on the premise of agrarian crisis<sup>45</sup>. Agenda can be ‘set’ and audience ‘primed’ appropriately for either of the optional ‘frames’. Similarly, the protest and stand-off on the question of amendments to the Land Acquisition Bill in parliament, there is an urban versus rural stand point, an industry versus agriculture view point, and also a corporate versus activist angle.

## News, Public Policy and Ideology

It is not in dispute that world political economy has undergone transformation from a state-centric to a neoliberal framework.<sup>46</sup> Since 1991, India's path of economic development has shown several features of the neoliberal framework. Barring a few exceptions, social development efforts are also implicated by this framework, with receding role of state as an actor in implementation of policies. As the locus of power under neoliberal framework shifts from the social and the political to the economic sphere, it is inevitable that reformists are impatient with the slow deliberative processes of political institutions and administrative apparatus. And, increasingly, the inevitable conflicts among private players, as also between private actors and state institutions, are required to be resolved by judicial processes.<sup>47</sup>

Increasingly pressured by neoliberal or market driven<sup>48</sup> politics, "de-governmentalisation"<sup>49</sup> or the declining influence of the institution of government over economy, makes policymaking challenging. Governments are alert towards impact of policies on the market sentiments and prospects of investments in critical sectors of the economy. There is criticism that the purpose of politics in neoliberal societies is "increasingly about getting voters to endorse policies that meet the demand of capital;"<sup>50</sup> with the ideology supporting primacy of markets, leaving as little as possible to the political institutions – and this explains, why societies without democratic political institutions as well as functioning democracies, alike can implement neoliberal policies<sup>51</sup>.

This ascendance of neoliberal politics has consequences for news and its choices of the content, the media, the author(s), the timing, the ownership and the dissemination strategies. The consequential impact of neoliberal influence on politics, and by extension on news can also be termed as a "crisis of voice".<sup>52</sup> This deficit of voice would get compounded, it is argued, if there is a declining citizen interest in day to day politics – the engagement being limited to voting political parties to power; as also declining citizen knowledge, "leading to a lack of support for legitimacy of democratic governments"<sup>53</sup>. News may influence public attitudes and inform public understanding about issues and support for policy proposals, and extensive news coverage can prompt wider dialogue in society about the causes and policy responses to issues.<sup>54</sup> News can influence the policy making process,<sup>55</sup> as well as inform policy actors about policy content,<sup>56</sup> which is why objectivity of public policy making and of public policy reporting, are equally important for the citizen-audience.

Neoliberalism in public policies impact news differently, from the news involving state-centric public policies. Where as in the latter, government is a dominant subject as well as source of the narrative, news of neoliberal public policies have markets and private players as important subjects – the public being common to both. Typically the narrative of state-centric public policy news may pertain to issues of inefficiency, shortages, corruption, price control, losses to the exchequer, rationing, licenses and permissions, inspections, bureaucratic delays etc. Neoliberal policies invoke strong support as well as stronger opposition; and the locus of the news narratives shifts to issues of competition, efficiency, favoritism, corruption, price decontrol, unfair practices etc. The critical narrative in the neoliberal policy paradigm questions the overemphasis on profitability and efficiency, seldom attending to the consequences of the state receding from its welfare role.

Corruption as a news narrative is common to both frameworks of public policies – however, while news about corruption in the context of state-centric policy consequences could blame the control systems as causal attributes; the news about the causes of corruption and scams in the private sector, under the neoliberal policy setting, would be

attributed, not to systemic weaknesses of overreliance on the market but on individual avarice – the ‘Satyam’ scandal exemplifies this treatment of news in the neoliberal paradigm<sup>57</sup>.

### News Narratives and Policy Shifts: Evidence from Privatization Policy

The public policy of privatization of the Bharat Aluminum Company (BALCO) has been newsworthy for the controversies surrounding it, particularly, when the policy shift first took place.<sup>58</sup> The media narrative dealt with, the timing of the policy decision<sup>59</sup>, on the future of workers, doubts on Sterlite’s commitment to environment<sup>60</sup>, doubts on the company’s valuation and lack of transparency in fixing the reserve price<sup>61</sup>, and even allegations of corruption<sup>62</sup>. The discourse was not limited to BALCO; rather it was extensively widened to the undesirability of privatization and disinvestment.<sup>63</sup> Subsequent news coverage shifted focus for at least three reasons:

First, the Supreme Court held that disinvestment being essentially an economic policy decision, was beyond judicial scrutiny, and that “a fair, just and equitable procedure has been followed in carrying out this disinvestment”<sup>64</sup>. The discourse was more or less settled, when even a neutral media focused on the apex court’s validation of the procedure followed, and government’s freedom to take policy decision.<sup>65</sup>

Second, as time has gone by and performance of privatized entities came to light, the discourse in the public sphere, generally, has transformed<sup>66</sup>. Indeed, several sections of the media used BALCO’s performance to justify the continuation of the public policy of disinvestment and privatization, even though the ruling alliance at the Centre had changed in the meanwhile.<sup>67</sup>

Third, Indian society gradually has become more familiar with contesting issues pertaining to privatization and disinvestment, and these public policy decisions have lost their novelty value; subsequent decisions on telecom (VSNL), airports (Delhi, Mumbai), tourism (ITDC properties) etc. have not raised criticism against privatization – other than news about strikes by employees<sup>68</sup>, or quotes from political leaders of various hues speaking for or against privatization.<sup>69</sup>

### News Narratives and Policy Shifts—Evidence from Domestic Aviation Policy

Public policy of deregulation of civil aviation is a good example of the news narratives under the state-centric policy frame versus a deregulated policy frame. News before 1994, when Indian Airlines monopolized the domestic market, abound in stories on mounting losses, burden of subsidies, poor passenger services, rude behavior of staff, flight delays, inefficiencies, aging aircrafts, poor maintenance, lack of flight connections, pilot errors, grounding of Airbus 320, aircraft purchase decisions, criticism of rising airline fares, employee strikes, pilots’ strike, aging fleet, capacity limitations during peak travel season, and so on<sup>70</sup>. In contrast, news on civil aviation in the last decade or so, barring a few exceptions (for example: staff strike in Jet Airways, stoppage of services by King Fisher Airlines, or say the financial problems of Spicejet Airlines) have been predominantly about fare-wars<sup>71</sup>, predatory pricing and cartelization<sup>72</sup>, need for regulations on fee and charges<sup>73</sup>, scheduling on profitable routes, neglect of unprofitable routes, efficiency, punctuality and on time services, resource raising by private airlines<sup>74</sup>, large purchase orders of aircrafts<sup>75</sup>,

low cost airlines, contractual nature of engaging workers, job insecurity, preventing competition<sup>76</sup>, mergers and acquisitions<sup>77</sup>, passenger amenities, modernization, profitable airlines and losses suffered by other airlines, policy options of permitting Foreign Direct Investment in domestic airlines,<sup>78</sup> impact of Globalization,<sup>79</sup> and of engagement of India's aviation sector with the outside world<sup>80</sup>.

The emphasis is on economic efficiency and performance in service delivery and consumer satisfaction; as against considerations of employee welfare, job security and budgetary subsidies in the older media narratives. Whereas governmental control and interference was narrated but seldom questioned in the past; issues of regulation and autonomy of institutions and competitive efficiency are necessary ingredients now, even in respect of the public sector<sup>81</sup>. It is no longer possible to explain away losses to the exchequer as a necessary consequence of social responsibility of the public sector of the economy, on the contrary the current narratives question continuance of loss making public enterprises,<sup>82</sup> and advocate privatization as a solution<sup>83</sup>. News on public policy decisions relating to the public sector would continue to question and inform the public about the manner of decision making, while the same is not relevant for private decisions of a similar nature- contrast, for instance, the private policy decision of IndiGo Airlines to place order for 250 Airbus aircrafts, with the order placed by Air India for 68 Boeing aircrafts<sup>84</sup>.

The news discourse in India in mainstream English language newspapers, barring one or two possible exceptions, builds on the triumph of the markets and inadequacies of the institution of government – indeed, the arguments make out the public systems to be the problem, even though this is only a borrowed discourse that was prevalent in the west – in the decade of 1960s and 1970s in the US and 1980s of Thatcherism in the UK. Government and public policy failures were the dominant discourse in the United States in 1960s, mainly influenced by the free market theorists.<sup>85</sup> Government failure, incompetence of the government, interested groups capturing fields through government, government abridging freedom– are all arguments, which have influenced public policies dictated by market theory.<sup>86</sup> The paradox in this discourse, is that there is a definite “democratic disconnect between a national narrative trumpeting small government and steadily increasing expectations of government.”<sup>87</sup> Indian media narrative does not seem to be capturing this paradox, even as the narrative is being copied some decades later in India.<sup>88</sup>

As we have seen, the logic of touting private interest consisting of “incentives, choice and competition,”<sup>89</sup> as represented by markets, to be superior in serving public purposes than governments, has its own consequences – the successive ‘securities scams’<sup>90</sup> bear testimony to it, notwithstanding attempts to apportion the blame as merely individual avarice.

## Features of Public Policy as News

Based on the foregoing discussions, it may be reasonably concluded that news about public policies are distinguishable in several ways, including, but not limited to, the following:

- (i) *Impact on Large Population:* while other news may or may not affect large sections of public, news reports on public policies invariably affect large sections of the population and may at times affect the entire society. For example, a policy making ‘aadhar’ card a mandatory proof of ‘unique identification’ potentially affects every citizen<sup>91</sup>.



- (ii) *Focus on Gainers and Losers*: news reports on public policies invariably signify who gains or who loses owing to the policy or the absence of it; also, news reports require research and investigative efforts on the part of journalists not only in order to unravel any hidden agenda on the part of proponents or the underlying power equations in promoting or denouncing or stalling policies. For example, the news on land acquisition policy would investigate interests of farmer-land owners apprehensive of land alienation, unskilled landless workers dependent on agriculture for livelihood,<sup>92</sup> private and public sector corporates forced to delay investment opportunities due to non-availability of land to set up production facilities,<sup>93</sup> public institutions engaged in irrigation, water supply, electricity and other infrastructure requiring land for completion of projects.<sup>94</sup>
- (iii) *Citizen as Stakeholder*: news reports on public policies relate to the government, its institutions, its systemic processes, its service delivery and efficiency—overall of which the audience have a crucial stakeholders' role and expectation; not only in their capacity as the electorate, but also as beneficiaries or losers of policy outcomes.
- (iv) *Domain Knowledge Prerequisite*: coverage of public policy news requires domain knowledge because of complexities of subjects or technicalities of procedures or both, when compared to other news. Journalists are not experts, nor are they expected to be so; and therefore, in communicating the intricate nuances of complex public policy issues, media has to rely on expert sources to understand the issue of public salience, and thereafter interpret the complexities in a manner intelligible to lay audiences. This mediation of complex issues, often full of technicalities, in informative and interesting formats for the benefit of the citizen-reader is a distinct feature of public policy news<sup>95</sup>.
- (v) *Premium on Accuracy*: news coverage demands not merely the accuracy of the processes followed in decision making, but also the accuracy of information or knowledge that forms the basis as well as rationale for the decisions and policy outcomes. The reader or audience expectations are on two counts – one, he or she as citizens expects the colossal bureaucracy to justify the latter's professionalism and expertise in view of the enormous burden of tax payer Rupees borne by him or her on the maintenance of the system; and second, if there are consequences of the policy on the living conditions or future of audience, they need to be reassured that the policy makers have not erred on their assumptions or the basis of the decisions.<sup>96</sup>
- (vi) *Pronounced Conflicts of Interest*: news pertaining to public policies on media itself (for example, regulatory policies regarding cross-holdings in media organizations or policies in regard to censorship), pose serious issues of possible conflict of interest.<sup>97</sup> Another, but a minor, reason for conflict of interest is the fact that public policy decisions also affect journalists as stakeholders.
- (vii) *Longer Life-cycle of News*: owing to the public interest involved, the news relating to public policies remain in currency for much longer period of time, before fading away from the public sphere. The reason could be that political statements and events contribute more to prolonging the lifecycle of news.<sup>98</sup> For example, the life cycle of the news relating to the public policy on reservation of seats for OBC students in admission to higher education institutions can be traced from December,

2005,<sup>99</sup> the coverage peaking in August 2006,<sup>100</sup> and thereafter on March 29, 2007<sup>101</sup> and on April 10, 2008<sup>102</sup>. The policy of reservation continued to be in the news— with the media highlighting various issues relevant to admissions, expansion of capacity, increase in institutions, merit and social justice, because implementation of the policy was staggered over a time period<sup>103</sup>. Indeed, the narrative also brought into focus diverse issues of real as well as imaginary concerns in respect of Indian higher education, including those in regard to quality and autonomy.<sup>104</sup>

- (viii) *Phased News Coverage*: public policy news lends itself to being scrutinized in three distinct stages – *a priori*, *concurrent*, as well as *ex-post facto* – for the reasons, respectively, of heightened policy expectations; support and opposition led controversies and conflicts; and policy outcomes which may be positive or negative. The news coverage on reservation for the OBC, mentioned above, is a good example of this characteristic.
- (ix) *Overriding Influence of Ideology*: due to the essentially political nature of public policies, policy related news have significant ideological influences. For example, “as opposed to frames of development that promoted national interest through the building of public infrastructures under the umbrella of Nehruvian socialism, the market-driven model of a neoliberal India interprets national development as individualized consumption.”<sup>105</sup>
- (x) *News Transcends Sectors*: news about any public policy is seldom limited to the issues surrounding that policy, but encompasses allied issues that may have impact on other public policies as well. For example, the policy in regard to ban on tobacco sales is good news for health policy<sup>106</sup>, and yet is of some concern in news on agriculture policy relating to tobacco farmers<sup>107</sup>.
- (xi) *Extra-territorial Impact of News*: repercussions and impact of news regarding public policies cannot be limited to their policy-jurisdictions; but on the contrary have extra-territorial impacts. For example, news regarding policy decisions of inter-state water disputes impact audience differently in the two or more states which are parties to the dispute. It is often dilemmatic for ‘national’ media or newspapers serving readership in more than one state jurisdiction to take a definite editorial stand on an inter-state issue of sensitivity, such as sharing of river waters. On the contrary, regional language newspapers can support their own state’s claims<sup>108</sup>. Similarly, news in regard to public policy decisions in the border-states have effect across international borders<sup>109</sup>.
- (xii) *Amenable to ‘Spin doctoring’*: news for, or against, public policies are more likely to yield to ‘spin doctoring’ at the hands of public relations outfits of governments as well as influential stakeholders such as the corporates. Benefits may be exaggerated by those who stand to benefit from policies. Equally, those who stand to lose would exaggerate its undesirability. Procedural lapses may be blown up to deflect from its merits or demerits. For example, the decision on procurement of defence equipment, can get positive treatment of being in the national interest of security<sup>110</sup>, or highlight the achievement of personalities<sup>111</sup>; or discredit, with contrasting news stories that give it a critical and negative treatment.<sup>112</sup>
- (xiii) *Unique Obligation towards Audience*: informing citizens about public policy i.e. spreading policy literacy, can be a corporate social responsibility of the media –

by questioning or endorsing the legitimacy, and the balance or domination of power in policy decisions.

- (xiv) *Responsiveness to News-sources*: public policy is sourced from a variety of institutions in a democracy – the legislature, through laws; the judiciary through judgments; and, the executive, through schematic programmes. Each source is treated differently in news coverage due to the respective binding constraint – of not breaching legislative privilege, or committing contempt of courts, or not perceived as dictated by governments.
- (xv) *No Absolute Narrative*: No narrative of any public policy can be comprehensive by itself, because of the multi-dimensional interpretations that are possible – after all, every policy is *inter alia* a social, political, economic and cultural construct.

## Conclusion

News can be useful to public policy in several ways. Early alerts through news can give advance notice to policy makers, service delivery or implementation agencies as well as governments to take corrective action well in time to reduce, if not eliminate, democratic-deficit or lack of democratic accountability and control over decision making in a polity. Media is a vital contributor to reducing the perceived distance between citizens and governments. One of the ways to look at the issue is to understand the declining sustained (and not merely electoral) interest of citizens in politics –as well as, “declining trust in both parliamentary institutions and political representatives.”<sup>113</sup> Even though research evidence of such an emerging trend is hard to come by in the Indian context, there is survey based evidence from advanced industrial societies.<sup>114</sup> However, the civil society agitation for creating *Lok Pal*, and the sustained public pressure against corruption in public offices, was indicative of the theatre of public action shifting to the public space of *Ram Lila Maidan* (Delhi), rather than the institution of Parliament, which ought to have been the obvious venue in a representative democracy. The public controversy surrounding the allocation of natural resources, in the aftermath of audit findings and the subsequent judiciary-directed investigations could all be said to have contributed to the erosion of public perception about the political class, at least in the eyes of those agitating against corruption: “....corruption is so much linked with power that our politicians have adopted a cynical attitude toward political morality.”<sup>115</sup>

The transaction between media (read, news) and public policy has been evaluated in the extremes – either downplaying influence of news in the policy process,<sup>116</sup> or exaggerating influence of news on public agenda.<sup>117</sup> Whereas media needs to be encouraged to discharge its public interest role, albeit with self-regulation and restraint, the role-expectations from the media would be futile if news renders itself vulnerable to internal non-editorial overtures or external influences. Due to the reason that news can be considered as “an object of policy formation,”<sup>118</sup> and “treated as an agent of representative democracy”<sup>119</sup>, it is considered a public good, which needs to be regulated so that the essential characteristics of a public good are not violated – that is to say no citizen is excluded from access to news, nor consumption reduced for anyone. We have also discussed the perspective of news being reduced to be “an object of commodification,”<sup>120</sup> and the limits to benefits from competition in the free ‘marketplace of ideas’. We also discussed how this perspective explains the rationale for efficiency and profit maximization for media organizations and the role of advertisement revenues therein, but also the scary prospects of ‘paid news’ in its extreme vulgar form. We have also looked at news in a third

perspective – that of news as an “object of public opinion,”<sup>121</sup> or an object of ‘rational-critical debate’ in the “public sphere”<sup>122</sup> to deliberate over social issues and form public opinion in the public interest.

In the ultimate analysis, news media has to encourage democratic participation, and not merely serve the policy elite; which, in the absence of newsroom diversity, cannot be ensured by technology alone. We have also explored evidence that news narrative on public policies is increasingly reflective of, and not evaluative of, policy shifts. In ideology-led policy shifts; media ought to be a contributor to the elevation of news narrative equally as a policy analyst and policy observer, and not get reduced to a tool in the larger battle for control of the public sphere.

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## Note

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