



WHO SETS THE AGENDA?

Does "Prime Time" Really Pace Policy?
The Indian Experience

Shruti Pandalai

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“Who sets the Agenda?”

**Does "Prime Time" Really Pace Policy?
The Indian Experience**

Shruti Pandalai



**INSTITUTE FOR DEFENCE
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This study is a retrospective attempt by myself as a journalist to analyse the Indian media's role in the process of foreign policy formulation. It is an extension of a research project I first took up during my academic sabbatical, pursuing an MA in International Studies and Diplomacy at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), University of London. I have expanded the ambit of this project as part of my work at IDSA, by incorporating contemporary media and policy dilemmas which have been heatedly debated and contested in public discourse and have recommended a policy approach for the same.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMINOLOGIES

NDTV 24x7: New Delhi Television Network (English news)

CNN IBN: Indian Broadcast Network in collaboration with CNN
(English news)

TIMES NOW: English news network run by Bennett and Coleman
group

BLOOMBERG-UTV: News and Business Channel

TOI: *The Times of India* (newspaper)

Frontline: Publication of *The Hindu*

MEA: Ministry of External Affairs

NSA: National Security Advisor

NAM Summit: Non-Aligned Movement Summit

TRP: Target Rating Point (used to measure audience reception and
ratings)

I

INTRODUCTION

“Television has changed the way the world reacts to crises”¹

-Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Former (UN) Secretary-General

“My job is all about lights, camera and action. Television has made my job tougher.”²

-Nirupama Rao, Former Foreign Secretary, India

It is an uneasy relationship, with *raison d’êtres* that are diametrically opposite. One is used to secrecy and negotiations behind closed doors, the other with a penchant for *exposés*. Yet the confluence of worlds of media and diplomacy have been deemed inevitable in a globalised world. The consequences have been dramatic. Nobel Laureate and economist Amartya Sen commented that, “the combination of electoral democracy with a free press has prevented famines even when crops have failed.”³ This analogy holds true for the realm of foreign policy too. Philip Seib argues that while television images may not bring down governments, they can “capture public interest and guide public attitude”; generating a momentum that will “shake any policymaker [...] who is unprepared to deal with it.”⁴ Schudson elaborates that the “power of the mass media lies not in the direct influence [...] but in the perception of experts and decision makers that the general public is influenced by the mass media.”⁵

This perception of the media as an “opinion shaper” in a democracy yields it a power that is difficult to ignore and an agency that adopts versatile roles in various crises. Unpacking this “perceived influence”

¹ Jakobsen, P.V (2000) p. 131.

² Nirupama Rao, Former Foreign Secretary, Government of India, recounting experience of her tenure as Spokesperson Ministry of External Affairs as quoted in Rai, A.K. (2003) p. 7.

³ Schudson, M. (2002), p. 263.

⁴ Seib, P. (1997), p. 47.

⁵ Walgrave et al (2006) quoting Schudson (1996) , pp. (99-103).

of the media specifically in the area of foreign policy and its multifaceted agency in the Indian context is the dominant theme of this paper which examines three basic issues: Does the Indian media influence and shape the policy agendas? If it does, then what is the role and extent of this influence? Is the influence independent or contingent upon conditions?

The focus is specific to the process of the impact of a news product on both public opinion and the policymaker and not so much on the methodology of news production. While the anatomy of news gathering: ownership, ideology, sourcing of news, etc., are fundamental to this study, they have been analysed briefly because of limitations of space. The emphasis is on analysing news coverage, its impact and its agency. Research of India's multi-lingual media industry is beyond the scope of this paper. This study mainly compares the foreign policy coverage of specific episodes by three of India's leading English news broadcast networks - CNN IBN, NDTV 24x7 and TIMES NOW within a given time frame.

It is also imperative to state at the outset that while this monograph takes media and the government to be discrete entities, it is aware and has spoken of the mutuality of their relationship. It also bears in mind that the media is not the sole source of information or pressure on government in the formulation of foreign policy, but is one among many factors.

The exhaustive literature on political communication is replete with debates on "who influences who" in the media-policymaker relationship and almost always draws upon the American experience. This monograph will attempt to condense the analysis of conditions, factors and determinants of media influence and to what extent it corresponds with the Indian experience. Recent foreign policy crises episodes - The immediate fall out on Indo-Pak relations post the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, the Indo-US Nuclear Deal (2005-2008), the border relations with China after incursion reports since 2006, and the 'race attacks' targeting Indians in Australia in 2009 are studied in detail. I have also tried to examine media coverage of humanitarian crises involving the Indian diaspora to map its influence on policy action.

Theoretical conclusions have been juxtaposed with observations made by primary sources - interviews with journalists who covered these

stories, diplomats involved in policy formulations, political communication and foreign policy experts as well tapping into my experience as an Anchor and Senior Correspondent with TIMES NOW. The extent of the impact of news coverage has been determined by reviewing prime time news debates, MEA press briefings, interviews and statements issued by the Prime Minister's Office. In addition, to isolate media's expanding role in diplomacy as a Track II level agent; a print campaign "*Aman Ki Asha*" (Hope for Peace) initiated jointly by Indo-Pak media houses to create an environment for cross border dialogue, has also been discussed.

The monograph is structured into five sections. The first, deals with the theoretical foundation and discusses the development of "the agenda setting" hypothesis. The advancement of literature is charted from Bernard Cohen's classic work *The Press and Foreign Policy* (1963) which introduced the "map-making" function of the press vis-à-vis the foreign policy attitudes of the public; to its concretisation by McCombs who argued that "[...] the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward political issues."⁶ The increasing recognition of media's impact came with the "mediatisation of politics" owing to innovations in technology.⁷

From Noam Chomsky's "manufacturing consent" hypothesis to the "CNN Effect" model and finally the "post-CNN Effect" developments including the al Jazeera phenomenon, and the social media revolution are discussed.⁸ Though scholars are divided on which theoretical approach explains 'how', 'when' and 'why' media influences foreign policy; there are two given assumptions. First, when policy is vague or undefined the media is seen as exerting an influence and not otherwise.⁹

⁶ Cohen, B. (1963) p. 13 and McCombs, M.E (1972) p. 177.

⁷ Walgrave et al (2004), p. 17.

⁸ Detailed explanation in Section II. Look in Chomsky and Herman (1988); Gowing, N. (1996), Strobel, W.P (1997), Livingston and Eachus (1995), Robinson, P. (1999) pp. (301-309), and Soroka, S.N (2003).

⁹ Gowing, N. (1996), Strobel, W.P (1997) Livingston and Eachus (1995), Soroka, S.N (2003), Seib, P. (1997) Linsky (1986), Basu, P.P (2003), Miller, D.B (2007), Gilboa, E. (2003), Naveh, C (2002) Robinson, P. (1999), Walgrave et al (2004).

Second, the time factor at play has changed the dynamics of policymaking introducing accountability and instant decisions.¹⁰ Section II will review this literature and outline methods to gauge influence, conditions and factors that determine media impact.

The trajectories of both India's foreign policy and the media industry underwent massive changes after the end of the Cold War and the restructuring and liberalisation of the economy in the early 90s. A consensus was established "among almost all of the political leadership about the desirability of pursuing a pragmatic foreign policy that enhances India's material capabilities and its standing in the global arena."¹¹ 'Self interest', 'economic and energy diplomacy' with an emphasis on "trade, not aid" were priority foreign policy goals.¹² As India ended years of dense regulation it welcomed the "satellite revolution."¹³ The MEA-media relationship changed dramatically as did the conduct of diplomacy. From the days of gushing editorials on Prime Minister Nehru's vision for India post-independence, to the current caustic criticism of MEA's foreign policy management; the contrast in the power equation is striking. The media too was on a steep learning curve.

According to Ambassador Sarna: "These two worlds are based on communication, they are sister worlds and should be best of partners, but I believe they are more step sisters."¹⁴ Many critics still reject any agenda setting role for the media and accuse it of echoing MEA concerns owing to India's tradition of a national press.¹⁵

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ganguly, S. (2010) p. 4.

¹² Raja Mohan, C. (2003) Introduction pp. (15-19).

¹³ Tharoor, K "India's Media Explosion", July 20,2009 ; *Foreign Policy*, accessed on URL : http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/07/20/indias_media_explosion on August 1, 2009.

¹⁴ Ambassador Navtej Sarna's talk to students at Indian School of Business, Hyderabad on "Media and its role in Diplomacy" On April 30, 2009 ; accessed on URL: <http://www.isb.edu/media/UsrSiteNewsMgmt.aspx?topicid=533>, on August 30, 2010.

¹⁵ Interview with Sukumar Muralidharan, Former Deputy Editor, *Frontline (The Hindu)* and current Programme Manager, International Federation of Journalists, via email on September 9, 2010.

Yet work done by Devesh Kapur and Sanjaya Baru proves that public opinion, increasingly shaped by television has an impact on contemporary Indian foreign policy. The nuances of this uneasy relationship will be examined in Section III.

Section IV dwells on the battle for influence between the print and electronic media coverage of foreign policy. It also investigates whether the media has a higher impact on domestic issues as compared to foreign policy.

Section V dives into an in-depth analysis of case studies combining theoretical conclusions with empirical evaluation and checks for conformity. It concludes with an elaboration of the role of the media as a “pressure group”, “participant”, “critical observer”, “feedback mechanism” and “Track II diplomacy” agent in the discussed crises and details the conditions which are the determinants of influence. It reiterates the consensus among academics, diplomats and journalists that the Indian media is still in a very nascent stage of its evolution and the pressures of a competitive market have given rise to the perception that TV coverage lacks the political maturity required to influence policy-makers. This conclusion may seem only logical since this paper examines media influence in specific foreign policy episodes and keeps in mind the distinction with long term foreign policy.

The emphasis is on the acknowledgement of television news as a key shaper of public opinion which due to its episodic nature impacts short term, day to day policy decisions constrained by real time coverage of events. The influence is observed to be limited and diffused, never leading to any concrete long term foreign policy changes.

I have concluded by making some policy recommendations in keeping with the suggestions made by the experts to ensure a more constructive interaction between the media and the government in respect to policy formulation.

II

AGENCY, AGENDA AND IMPACT

Jessica Mathews observed that the biggest power shift that globalisation brought with it was the “breaking of the state’s monopoly over the collection and management of information.”¹⁶ Monroe Price agrees, stating that the globalisation of media is not a uni-dimensional phenomena focussed on producing messages to “dominate the world consciousness”.¹⁷ He argues that the global media space:

...shape(s) common narratives; (is) a space in which ideologies compete and forge allegiances that ultimately determine persistence of governments and nations themselves and an arena where imagery becomes a supplement or substitute of force.¹⁸

The acknowledgement of the power wielded by an “image” was first made by columnist Walter Lippman in 1922 when he observed that the mass media influences and shapes public perception through images; a hypothesis now known as “the agenda setting theory.”¹⁹

2.1 Agenda Setting Theory: Gatekeeping, Framing and Priming

Bernard Cohen’s oft cited quote, “the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about”²⁰ was the first landmark study that connected media and foreign policy way back in 1963. McCombs and Shaw concretised this idea in 1972 proving that

¹⁶ Mathews, J. (1997).

¹⁷ Price, M.E (2002), p. 3.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Tumber, H. (1999) pp. (5-10), Excerpt from Walter Lippman “*Public Opinion*” (1922).

²⁰ Cohen, B. (1963), p. 13.

“agenda setting” for political campaigns was affected by the rate at which the news media covered a particular story and the extent to which the public thought it important.²¹ It outlined the media’s role as a “gatekeeper of public information” through its selection of what constituted news.²² This process of influence was seen as being three staged. First by discussing certain issues, the media was flagging an agenda (media agenda); the issues discussed were salient to public interest (public agenda); and finally these issues were viewed as being important to policy makers (policy agenda).²³ However the question of the causality between the issue’s salience in terms of public opinion and media influence was left open.

Iyengar and Kinder (1987) tried to establish causality by reworking the hypothesis to include the concepts of “priming” and “framing”.²⁴ They argued that the media “does not alter reality” but “changes and shapes perceptions” by presenting an issue in a particular context (framing) and positioning it by the act of highlighting and association (priming) thereby influencing judgement.²⁵ They proved that a report linking poor economic growth with a presidential policy triggered the perception of a drop in presidential performance.²⁶ Zaller and Feldman described it as “top of the head” judgement.²⁷ So while priming occurs “when a given message activates a mental concept which [when repeated] for a period of time increases the possibility of that concept”, framing is how “news messages help determine what audiences focus on” depending on effects of “message patterns and audience schema that guide this information.”²⁸

²¹ McCombs, M.E. and Shaw, D.L. (1972).

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Iyengar, S. and Kinder, D. (1987).

²⁵ Ibid. pp. (80-82).

²⁶ Ibid. p. 82.

²⁷ Zaller, J. and Feldman, S. (1992).

²⁸ Bryant, J. and Oliver, M.B (edited) (2009) p. 230.

2.2 Manufacturing Consent and the CNN Effect Model

The concept of news media as a filter shaping opinion and indirectly influencing policy lead to the development of two schools of scholarship: the Manufacturing Consent approach (propaganda model) and the CNN Effect model. The ‘Manufacturing Consent’ approach is bifurcated into the “elite vs executive”. “The executive version (e.g. Chomsky and Herman 1988) highlights the extent to which news media content is in conformity with the agendas and frames of reference of government officials.”²⁹ The elite version in contrast, “holds that news media coverage conforms to the interests of political elites in general whether they are in the executive, legislative or any other politically powerful position in society.”³⁰ This approach led to in-depth research on issues of ownership of media houses by elites and their influence on news content based on ideology, which manifested in the framing and presentation of news. Wolfseld’s “political contest model” is posited on a similar argument that “the best way to understand the role of press in politics is to view the competition over news media as a part of a larger and more significant contest for political control.”³¹ However; since this paper concerns itself only with investigating the influence of the news product on policymaking and not the process of news content gathering, the analysis of specific literature is beyond the scope of this study.

The “CNN Effect” model on the other hand developed around the time when the satellite revolution was taking place following the “LIVE” coverage of the 1991 Iraq war. The images of starving children in Somalia, that forced a US intervention in 1994 and pictures of the body bags of US soldiers that triggered the decision to pull out troops are infamous examples of the CNN Effect - that news can make policy.³² This factoring in of the “real time (response) fundamentally changed the rules of the game” and left many scholars worried.³³

²⁹ Robinson, P. (2001), p. 525.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 526.

³¹ Gilboa, E. (edited) (2002) p. 135.

³² Robinson, P. (1999) p. 303.

³³ Miller, D.B (2007) p. 3.

Gergen while warning of the dangers of ‘tele-democracy’ observed that the “power of the camera had foreign leaders, diplomats and even terrorists lining up with tailor made messages” for audiences.³⁴ Gilboa cautioned that “real time coverage imposes constraints on the policy making process” shortens reaction time, demands immediate an response to crises, excludes experts and diplomats, facilitates diplomatic manipulations, creates high expectations, and delivers instant judgments.³⁵ Others like Livingston dismissed linear interpretations, focussing on layers of agency: “accelerant in policy decision making, impediment in policy goals and agenda setting (role) in humanitarian crises.”³⁶

2.3 The al Jazeera Phenomenon and The New Media Revolution

Textbooks on international political communication have revised their lexicons to include the “al Jazeera effect” or phenomenon in their texts, especially after the network came under praise for their coverage and reportage of the famous “Arab Spring”. The channel brought the uprisings across the Arab world to living rooms across the globe, and is credited for inspiring some rebellions while spurring humanitarian action in others. Credit came from unexpected quarters too; US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton quipped “al Jazeera has been the leader in literally changing people’s minds and attitudes. And like it or hate it, it is really effective.”³⁷

Yet al Jazeera had existed before the Arab Spring and was infamous as the channel that carried the Osama tapes. It had a maverick image, and attempted to modernise state controlled Arab language broadcasting and even causing diplomatic crises due to its outspokenness.³⁸ Ironically, al Jazeera is owned and funded by the Emir of Qatar, and enjoys

³⁴ Gergen, D.R. (edited) (1991) p. 47.

³⁵ Gilboa, E. (2003), p. 97.

³⁶ Livingston, S. (1997) p. 2.

³⁷ “Al Jazeera is real news, US losing information war: Clinton”; March 2, 2011, ABC News, accessed on URL: <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2011/03/sec-of-state-hillary-clinton-al-jazeera-is-real-news-us-losing-information-war/> on January 20, 2012.

³⁸ Zayani, M. (edited) (2005), p. 1.

“an unprecedented amount of freedom which makes it a safe haven for free speech in the Arab world”³⁹; even though some biases are ingrained.

It was revolutionary because as a network through its coverage and chat shows it was able to raise issues like human rights abuse, persecution of dissenters, state corruption, Islamic fundamentalism and the Sharia which were earlier taboo in public discourse.⁴⁰ It was a de-facto “pan-Arab opposition” and a forum for resistance thus filling in the political void in most of the countries.⁴¹ Analysts believe through its open questioning of governance and practices it has managed to instil in a “loose sense the culture of accountability” where “leading figures and policy makers have suddenly become more accountable and answerable to their people.”⁴²

al Jazeera according to most analysts had established itself as an independent actor in policy making in the Middle East, shaping opinions and accelerating decisions. So then why suddenly has the power of al Jazeera been felt now during the Arab Spring? I have tried to argue elsewhere that al Jazeera’s efforts were bolstered by the social media revolution that was slowly gaining ground in the Middle East.⁴³

The media phenomenon we witnessed in 2011 during the Arab Spring was the product of a symbiotic relationship. Social media (facebook, Twitter, Youtube) generated the content, which al Jazeera played out, “framed” and amplified. “Cell phone images gave a certain ‘cine´ma ve´rite’” quality to the protests, and let the viewers illicitly see images the authorities wanted to prohibit.”⁴⁴ They also provided for translation of events to the non-Arabic media and audience.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 2.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ See “Lessons from 2011: New Media Revolution Is a Strategic Asset”, Pandalai, S., January 13, 2012; IDSA Issue Brief; URL: <http://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/Lessonsfrom2011TheNewMediaRevolutionisaStrategicAsset> on January 30, 2012.

⁴⁴ “The revolution will not be tweeted” Alterman, J. B, *The Washington Quarterly* (2011) 34:4, pp. (103-116); p. 112.

al Jazeera framed the narrative to a global audience. It was a good story: a screen teeming with protestors, and a script dotted with a healthy dose of adjectives which defined the activists as torch bearers of a revolution.⁴⁵ This storyboard had two consequences- first the localised protests organised with the aid of social media were now 'ON AIR' across the world as an "international story"; secondly encouraged by the news coverage ordinary citizens felt the need to be "part of the movement" thereby generating content and using the social media to "post it online."⁴⁶ The transformation was from "observers of activism" to that of "activists", which significantly strengthened the movement.⁴⁷

In fact, in my research I came across a report prepared by the Dubai School of Government which included surveys which revealed that social media membership in the Middle East had doubled since the beginning of the revolution and it's black out by authoritative regimes had "spurred people to be more active, decisive and to find ways to be more creative about communicating and organising."⁴⁸

It is no wonder then that the competitive world of TV journalism has embraced social media with such enthusiasm. It has not just become a very bankable source to feed the 24 hour monster of LIVE TV, but media honchos have realised that the only way to ensure survivability while increasing inter-activity and the numbers is to tap the combined potential of all media. Eric Qualman in his book, *Socialonomics: How Social Media Transforms the Way We Live and Do Business*, sums it up well: "We don't find news, the news finds us."⁴⁹

We saw this happening in our backyard in India, when the Anna Hazare movement went viral and television editors were only too happy to

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 111.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 104.

⁴⁸ For more see "Lessons from 2011: New Media Revolution Is a Strategic Asset", Pandalai, S., January 13, 2012, IDSA Issue Brief, URL: <http://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/Lessonsfrom2011TheNewMediaRevolutionisaStrategicAsset> on January 30, 2012.

⁴⁹ "*Socialonomics: How Social Media Transforms the Way We Live and Do Business*", Qualman, E. (2009, 2011).

bring the protests into the living room day after day to hold endless discussions that truly suited 24 hour formats. A 74 year old Gandhian's fight to bring accountability and transparency in governance; an Indian version of the Ombudsman Bill tied up neatly with the various graft scams exposed by competing news networks and made for an explosive story. Of course one could not ignore the numbers.

The India Against Corruption Campaign page had over 350,000 followers in September 2011.⁵⁰ Anna Hazare who has several fan pages dedicated to him, took to blogging sensing the power of this medium. A website petitioning for Hazare's movement (www.avaaz.org) had signed up 170,000 people in 24 hours.⁵¹ Social media co-ordination and broadcast media coverage ensured that Anna's call of "jail bharo" or the "voluntary courting of arrest" on December 30, 2011, saw 1.3 lakh people signing up.⁵² While the agitation was eventually called off, the power of the movement continued to be felt.

The momentum was such that government of India decided to combat Team Anna's tweet for tweet by putting together a blueprint to counter Anna Hazare's social media clout. It was also reported that the government was reaching out to private news broadcasters to convince them to stop 24 hour coverage of the Lokpal Bill protests, which they believed was fanning the nation wide agitation.⁵³

A similar example in the US is the "Occupy Wall Street" movement, and even anti-regime protests in China and Russia where media is highly state controlled and monitored. In these countries electronic media in combination with social networking platforms have polarised public

⁵⁰ Anna to Launch Public Fast as Govt Relents, By Bendern, P. and Williams, M., August 18, 2011, Reuters, accessed on URL: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/18/us-india-protest-idUSTRE77G0PF20110818> on January 29, 2012.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² "Battlecry: 1.3 Lakh Join anna's jail bharo campaign", Diwan, H., December 27, 2011, *Times of India*, accessed on URL: http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-12-27/india/30561301_1_battle-cry-jail-bhara-campaign-court-arrest on January 4, 2012.

⁵³ For more see "Lessons from 2011: New Media Revolution Is a Strategic Asset", Pandalai, S., January 13, 2012, IDSA Issue Brief , URL: <http://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/Lessonsfrom2011TheNewMediaRevolutionisaStrategicAsset> on January 30, 2012.

opinion and created situations where governments have been forced to act.⁵⁴

It's a phenomenon which has given a potent tool to the masses. The means to an end and how innovatively they are used, could give regimes, authoritative or otherwise, nightmares. On the other hand, regimes could master the medium to reach out to their people. Either way it has become, inadvertently, an element of the policy formulation process.

2.4 Media “mood setting” in Foreign Policy

Coming back to the literature, most scholars have accepted media as an integral part of the foreign policy formulation process and have attempted to establish its versatility. Philip Seib notes: “The news media do influence foreign policy. Not determine but influence; the semantic distinction is important.”⁵⁵ Derek Miller reiterates that while there is a consensus that “media pressure” alters a state’s conduct of international relations, it is often ignored that “embedded in the term ‘pressure’ is the theory of state craft itself.”⁵⁶ Today, news organisations have been elevated to the status of key players because of the speed and quantity of the coverage that prompts statements from the government.⁵⁷ For a policymaker using the medium strategically as “diplomatic proxy” can be irresistible.⁵⁸ Chanan Naveh elaborates that the media plays a dual role – that of partially creating the environment for policy promulgation and serving as a feedback mechanism.⁵⁹ Here the media performs “the informative, correlative, and mobilising functions”.⁶⁰ It acts as the source of international news to the public, journalists interpret events, provide background analysis and incorporate society into the internal policy making environment.⁶¹

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Seib, P. (1997), p. 139.

⁵⁶ Miller, D.B (2007) p. 2.

⁵⁷ Seib, P. (1997), p. 86.

⁵⁸ Seib, P. (1997), p. 86, and Miller, D.B (2007) p. 17.

⁵⁹ Naveh, C. (2002), p. 10.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Miller builds on this hypothesis explaining why a “media-government” conversation has impact arguing that even when the “media pegs its coverage to elite discourse” - what he terms “indexing” - it might “actuate an influence” on policymaking.⁶² He reasons that “the exercise of power and authority and hence reputation is grounded on the executive’s unique capability to “speak for the nation”.⁶³ If the media positions or portrays the executive’s actions as incompetent or immoral, then the elite consensus and power coalition will be disturbed. This creates the pressure on the executive to act.⁶⁴

So how does one measure the extent of this impact? Theoretical approaches attempting to map the agency of the media agree on core conclusions. The media in most cases takes on roles of a vocal “pressure group”, a “critical observer” and “participant” in policy formulation.⁶⁵ There is consensus that the *time factor speeds up the decision making process* and *negative coverage* in particular tends to *push decision making up* to a higher level of bureaucracy. Media coverage influences content by “forcing officials to review the policy, creating new options or narrowing down options.”⁶⁶ Naveh made a case for media’s involvement as a “participant” where it creates the environment first by working as the “input channel” for the policymaker; and second as a feedback mechanism where decisions are tested, gauging public opinion and creating legitimacy for action.⁶⁷ Gilboa’s work on “media diplomacy” illustrates how the media acts as “a third party” pursuing “track II diplomacy” in the pre-negotiation stages. It is used for “trials” of policies through press conferences and leaks, and as a “de facto hotline” when all lines of communication are severed during a crisis.⁶⁸ The lines between journalists and diplomats blur when reporters assume the mantle of mediators during interviews and explore avenues to resolve deadlocks,

⁶² Miller, D.B (2007) pp. (192-197).

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Basu, P.P (2003), pp. (18-21).

⁶⁶ Linsky quoted in Basu, P.P (2003), p. 21, Seib, P. (1997), Miller, D.B (2007), Gilboa, E. (2003), Naveh, C. (2002).

⁶⁷ Naveh, C. (2002), p. 10.

⁶⁸ Gilboa, E. (2002), pp. (193-208).

a role Gurevitch terms as that of “international political brokers.”⁶⁹ Media events viewed as “spectacular celebrations of peacemaking” can be useful in promoting negotiations and working towards peace agreements and building confidence.⁷⁰ Even as ethical debates continue on media manipulation, the reverse holds true when it upsets the policy environment. “Quiet diplomacy is incompatible with intense, intrusive news coverage. [...] Journalists tend to ask questions with the aim of eliminating ambiguities, which might make bargaining more difficult” for the policymaker.⁷¹

Media’s power, however; is not a guarantee of influence cautions Seib. “The flurry of attention without substantive policy change illustrates the mirage like quality of the relationship between news coverage and policy making.”⁷² The extent of influence is indirect and not deterministic. So in the absence of a comprehensive theoretical approach, scholars have agreed on certain specific variables and conditions that must exist for media impact; when observed either from angle of the “manufacturing consent” paradigm or the “post-CNN Effect” approach. The next section explores this in detail.

2.5 Conditionality for Media Influence and Agency

Walgrave et al have argued that “political agenda setting by the media is contingent upon a number of conditions.”⁷³ The input variables include the type of issues covered (e.g., obtrusive vs. unobtrusive), the specific media outlets (television vs. print), and the sort of coverage (e.g., negative vs. positive). Political context variables like “the time period (election vs. non-election), the type of political actors and institutional norms in their interaction with input variables produce outputs that range from no political adoption to fast and substantial adoption of media (highlighted) issues.”⁷⁴ Most scholars are agreed on the criteria

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Seib, P. (1997), p. 35.

⁷² Ibid. p. 43.

⁷³ Walgrave et al (2006), p. 88.

⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 104.

of “policy clarity.” The impact of the media on foreign policymaking is most when the policy is “soft or inchoate.”⁷⁵ Robinson notes that this approach fits neatly with the “manufacturing consent” paradigm since it implies that “news coverage that is critical of executive policy is possible when there exists elite conflict over policy.”⁷⁶ Thus, “when a government loses control over the political-diplomatic process, the media become independent and critical.”⁷⁷

‘Issue salience’ as a variable, decides influence. This includes the type of issue - “obtrusive or in-obtrusive.” When the media is the “solitary source [of information] for public and politicians, their impact increases.”⁷⁸ Its variation variable is ‘issue sensitivity’ is also important.

Arthur Miller et al observe that “media coverage interacts with an audience’s pre-existing sensitivities to produce changes in issue concern”⁷⁹ A dramatic event or “a continually unfolding international drama [...] that depends on the media for production and interpretation” will carry more weight than everyday news due to the element of pressure.⁸⁰ The “newness of an issue” also has “stronger bearings on the political agenda than eternal issues.”⁸¹ According to Wood and Peake, longstanding foreign policy problems give rise to a static response mechanism which they term as ‘issue inertia’.⁸² New issues have greater impact as policymakers are sourcing more information to take a clear stance.⁸³

Third, the impact is proportional to the type of “issue coverage”. “Unambiguous reporting clearly defining problems and pointing out

⁷⁵ Seib, P. (1997), Miller, D.B (2007), Gilboa, E. (2003), Robinson, P. (1999), Livingston and Strobel (1997).

⁷⁶ Robinson, P. (1999), p. 308, Robinson, P. (2001), Miller, D.B (2007).

⁷⁷ Naveh, C. (2002), p. 10, Wolfsfeld (1997), p. 25.

⁷⁸ Walgrave et al (2006), p. 92, Soroka, S. N (2002).

⁷⁹ Miller, A. et al (1980), p. 45.

⁸⁰ Wood, D. and Peake, J. (1998), p. 182, Walgrave et al (2004), Cobb, R. and Elder, T. (1971).

⁸¹ Walgrave et al (2006), pp. (92-93).

⁸² Wood, D. and Peake, J. (1998).

⁸³ Walgrave et al (2006), pp. (92-93), Linsky (1986), Trumbo (1985).

solutions” is more influential than “superficial coverage which leads to superficial policy.”⁸⁴ The “duration” and “intensity” of media attention has a direct effect on public opinion and policy shaping.⁸⁵ Also “negative news bears more agenda-setting impact than other news” as it hastens the attention given to the problem and invokes immediate reactions usually higher up the decision making chain.⁸⁶

Fourth, clarity of ‘political responsibility’ is a defining factor specifically in the debate of foreign versus domestic policy. Scholars reason that existence of clear political responsibility in case of the former makes for accountability, unlike, in, domestic issues where the burden is shared and blame games overshadow political action.⁸⁷

Finally, Pritchard and Berkowitz argue that media is able to influence “symbolic agendas more than resource agendas.”⁸⁸ Symbolic agendas are defined as “those lists of issues that require visible but not necessarily substantive action” while resource agendas are “issues that require substantive action, including possible allocation of resources.”⁸⁹ So, in effect, “media pressures on reluctant governments are most likely to result in minimalist policies aimed at diffusing pressure” rather than real action.⁹⁰ Most scholars attribute this to media’s “short attention span running from one crisis to another, diluting its impact on the workings of democracy.”⁹¹

⁸⁴ Walgrave et al (2006), pp. (92-93), Seib, P. (1997), p. 143, Protess et al (1987).

⁸⁵ Walgrave et al (2006), pp. (92-93), Kingdon, J. W (1984) and Lang et al (1991).

⁸⁶ Baumgartner (1997), Walgrave et al (2004, 2006), Basu, P.P (2003), Seib, P. (1997), Miller, D.B (2007), Gilboa, E. (2003), Naveh, C. (2002).

⁸⁷ Walgrave et al (2006), p. 92, Wood and Peake (1998), Miller, D.B (2007).

⁸⁸ Walgrave et al (2004), p. 13.

⁸⁹ Ibid., Pritchard and Berkowitz (1993).

⁹⁰ Jakobsen, P. V (2000), p. 138.

⁹¹ Walgrave et al (2004), p. 4, Seib, P. (1997), Miller, D.B (2007), Gilboa, E. (2003), Robinson, P. (1999), Livingston and Strobel (1997), Kingdon, J. W (1984), Dearing and Rogers (1996), Protess, Cook et al. (1991).

III

THE MEA, THE QUOTE AND THE SOUND BYTE

3.1 The Story till the 1990s

In democratic regimes the “social libertarian” model of journalism, wherein the press operates as a public watchdog and is instrumental in the foreign policy formulation process is the norm.⁹² India, though a robust democracy, was an anomaly in this hypothesis in terms of foreign policy reportage. Up until the early 90s’, when massive, market liberalisation was undertaken, “Indians only had access to the grainy broadcasts of ‘Doordarshan’ the staid state-run network” that doled out government propaganda.⁹³

Sumit Ganguly argues that “personal, national and systemic” factors have shaped India’s choice of foreign policy.⁹⁴ In the first phase from 1947-1962 under the aegis of Jawaharlal Nehru; the “ideational” foreign policy reflected his idealism at a personal level, the “national experience of colonialism” translated into a stance of non-alignment, and at a systemic level this policy allowed a “materially weak state to play a significant role (in UN peacekeeping operations) beyond its capabilities.”⁹⁵ Diplomatic reporting idolised Nehru for “playing an (third world) activist role on the world stage” and was coloured with a nationalist vision.⁹⁶ Veteran columnist Inder Malhotra observed that, “under the circumstances, it should be no surprise that coverage of Indian foreign policy and diplomatic initiatives by Indian newspapers

⁹² Basu, P.P (2003), p. 19.

⁹³ Tharoor, K, “India’s Media Explosion” July 20,2009 for Foreign Policy, accessed on URL : http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/07/20/indias_media_explosion on August 1, 2010.

⁹⁴ Ganguly, S. (2010), p. 1.

⁹⁵ Ibid. pp. (1-2).

⁹⁶ Rai, A.K (2003), p. 10.

and journals through the first decade of independence had turned into a long affair with Nehru."⁹⁷ The MEA version of events was almost always accepted.⁹⁸

During the second phase (1962-1991), "the affair between Nehru and the chroniclers of Indian diplomacy soured" with his "failure to resolve the Kashmir dispute" and the "u-turn in Sino-Indian relations" culminating in a brutal war in 1962.⁹⁹ Diplomatic reporting reflected the elite perception and went on an aggressive anti-China campaign, lambasting Nehru's "bogus brotherhood" slogan of "Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai" making any compromise with China impossible.¹⁰⁰ At a personal level, Nehru's leadership was challenged for the first time; at the national level there was a "political outcry" against the "imagined Chinese threat" and systemically, US post-war assistance to India was seen as an attempt to "maintain the balance of power in Asia".¹⁰¹ The next crisis exploded when Indira Gandhi was prime minister. This was the 1971 Indo-Pak war and the creation of Bangladesh. Despite the war cementing India's status as major regional power, again "personal, national and systemic factors prevented [India] from playing a significant role in global affairs."¹⁰² Personally, Indira Gandhi's obsession with centralisation of power and populist economic policies retarded material growth; the oil crisis spill-over of the 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict hurt India's economy nationally; and at the systemic level "lack of resources" dwarfed its global standing.¹⁰³ "By polarising almost every aspect of Indian politics and public life, she [Indira] also saw to it that any comment on foreign policy got sharply divided into two: gushing or trenchant"; thus lacking any cumulative impact.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 11.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ganguly, S. (2010), pp. (2-3).

¹⁰² Ibid. p. 3.

¹⁰³ Ibid. p. 3.

¹⁰⁴ Rai, A.K (2003), p. 12.

3.2 The 90s: Liberalisation and the Media Revolution

Post-Cold War India found itself in unfamiliar terrain and sought to restructure its foreign policy to “acquire renewed relevance.”¹⁰⁵ At the personal level, Narasimha Rao who became prime minister after Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination had to rebuild India’s shaken confidence.¹⁰⁶ National and systemic factors also called for a drastic foreign policy re-appraisal as India was in the middle of an acute financial crisis with no hope of a bail out after the collapse of USSR.¹⁰⁷ Raja Mohan outlines five decisive shifts in India’s orientation: socialist to a modern capitalist society, emphasis on politics transformed into stress on economics, self interest over “Third Worldism”, rejection of anti-Western notions, and finally a shift from idealism to pragmatism.¹⁰⁸ This manifested itself in the form of the opening up of India’s economy and the restructuring of its markets.

The 90s ushered in what former Information and Broadcasting Minister, Priyaranjan Das Munshi, called the “media revolution”.¹⁰⁹ As foreign investment flowed in, the news landscape burgeoned into a competitive conglomerate of private media empires.¹¹⁰ The “launch of satellite television with Hong-Kong based Star TV and its 39-nation footprint in May 1991[...] transformed the face of Indian television, with its multiple channels and aggressive market-driven entertainment programming.”¹¹¹ Niche news networks today post average revenues

¹⁰⁵ Ganguly, S. (2010), p. 3.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. p. 3.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. pp. (3-4).

¹⁰⁸ Raja Mohan, C. (2003); Introduction, pp. (11-22).

¹⁰⁹ Tharoor, K, “India’s Media Explosion” July 20, 2009 for Foreign Policy, accessed on URL: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/07/20/indias_media_explosion on August 20, 2010.

¹¹⁰ Sundaram, R. (2005), p. 55.

¹¹¹ Sarma, N. “The Changing Face of Indian Media – Implications for Development Organisations”, September 15, 1999; accessed on URL : <http://www.comminit.com/en/node/1893/307> on May 03, 2010.

of INR 2 billion and growing.¹¹² Market dynamics “increased production values” and brought in “tabloid” news formats that now dominate the “perfect TRP bouquet.”¹¹³ The MEA has taken its time to adjust. Ambassador Sarna acknowledges that, “technology has had its impact on our jobs. The job of a foreign office spokesperson does not remain that of a reporter but is more analytical now. It demands that he adds value to the news, analyse the political impact etc.”¹¹⁴

The electronic media revolution, C Rajamohan points out, has impacted the MEA-beat correspondent relations as well. He elaborates that:

The class background, educational qualifications, and the pay of the media personnel has dramatically evolved during the 1990s, and they no longer have a reason to acknowledge the presumed superiority of the officer class, nor are the new generation of journalists dependent on a variety of favours dispensed by the state machinery. The media’s access to political leaders within and outside the government has become closer over the years and many journalists themselves have effortlessly moved into political parties and the parliament. The tabloidisation of the media meant it is constantly on the lookout for juicy human interest stories about the foreign office and the rest of the bureaucratic system; it could make or break personal reputations of senior officers. From being a one-sided relationship, the media-foreign office relationship is a two-way street of mutual give and take.¹¹⁵

However, even now there exists an uneasy balance, argues Rajdeep Sardesai, currently editor-in-chief CNN IBN. According to him, it is tricky to report on the ministry of defence and the ministry of external

¹¹² Indian entertainment industry Focus 2010: Media research report ; accessed on URL: http://www.televisionpoint.com/research/icif2010_tv.html on January 29, 2012.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ambassador Navtej Sarna’s talk to students at Indian School of Business, Hyderabad on “Media and its role in Diplomacy.” On April 30, 2009 ; accessed on URL: <http://www.isb.edu/media/UsrSiteNewsMgmt.aspx?topicid=533>, on August 30, 2010.

¹¹⁵ “The Making of Indian Foreign Policy: The Role of Scholarship and Public Opinion” Raja Mohan, C., July 13, 2009, ISAS Working Paper No 73.

affairs since in many cases if the reporter does not toe the official line, he/she is dubbed anti-national and in such cases it becomes difficult for networks to resist pressure.¹¹⁶

Despite the pressures of the relationship, it is obvious that in contemporary India media is an important shaper of public opinion which makes it influential in the eyes of the policymakers.

3.3 Public Opinion and Indian Foreign Policy

So why does the media framing of public opinion matter so much? According to Devesh Kapur, even in the past when foreign policy was dominated by a ruling elite, they always:

...took into account latent public opinion wherever sensitivities of certain sections of the population mattered, be it religious minorities (in shaping India's Middle East policies), regional groups (such as Tamils towards Sri Lanka) or a majority community (often reflected in the hard line positions vis-à-vis Pakistan).¹¹⁷

He goes on to argue that public opinion is going to play a more crucial role in the shaping of India's future foreign policy goals, owing to the fragmented nature of the current political landscape. "Fierce electoral competition means that marginal voters matter more for electoral success."¹¹⁸ Simply put, foreign policy issues may not matter to the median voter, but may do for the marginal voter, and hence acquire greater salience. In keeping with the current economic trajectory of India, the marginal voter's profile is going to be increasingly more urban, educated and coming from a demographic where foreign policy issues matter in voting preferences.¹¹⁹ So for the elites, great difference of opinion with the masses is no longer an option.

¹¹⁶ Sardesai, R.; "Manipulation and Bias in News" in *Making News: Handbook of the Media in Contemporary India* (2006) edited by Sahay, U., OUP.

¹¹⁷ Kapur, D., "Public Opinion and Indian Foreign Policy" *India Review*, Vol 8, no 3, July-September 2009, p. 290, pp. (286-305).

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

This is why television debates have gained so much influence, reiterates Baru:

The electronic media, like Parliament, has become an arena in which party political differences on foreign policy do get articulated more forcefully because of the nature of the medium. In fact, television news channels may have contributed to increased public discord on foreign policy by deliberately strait-jacketing all 'discussions' into binary, conflictual 'for-and-against' debates. Rather than facilitate a consensus such 'argumentative' debates foster divergence. While television resorts to this practice to increase viewer attention and make news more 'entertaining', this has increased the role of the media in shaping political thinking on foreign policy issues.¹²⁰

He elaborates three factors namely:

i) the gradual erosion of the domestic political consensus on foreign policy, giving the media the role of an arbiter and an independent analyst of contending political views; ii) The media revolution and expansion, with the rise of television and business journalism and the growing importance of private corporate advertisement revenues, as opposed to government support for media, in influencing media economics; and iii) Finally, the increasing influence of the middle class and the business class in the media has also influenced media thinking on foreign policy.¹²¹

3.4 Media's Map of the World: Myopic?

In spite of the above arguments of media and business influencing the thinking on foreign policy critics argue that the Indian media's "mapping of the world"¹²² has always followed the government's frame of reference. Suhasini Haidar, Senior Editor, CNN IBN says that "the

¹²⁰ Baru, S., "The Influence of Business and Media on Indian Foreign Policy" *India Review*, Vol 8, no 3, July-September 2009, p. 279, pp. (265-285).

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Cohen, B. (1963), p. 13.

focus currently is the work done in terms of relationship building with US-Pak-China-Australia and that reflects in the coverage. Unfortunately, this tunnel vision has cost us our status as the voice of the smaller developing nations.”¹²³ Ambassador Leela Ponappa argues otherwise, saying that this was true earlier but not now:

It is the media that is focused on US-Pak-China. Government’s focus would be better ascertained through international engagements taking place through visits, bilateral consultations that are constantly ongoing, but a majority of which receive little media attention.¹²⁴

Professor Thussu, of the Indian Media Centre at the University of Westminster, agrees that the “elite discourse seems to be increasingly following a pro-US agenda – presumably influenced by the recent nuclear deal. This is also reflected in large sections of the English-language media.”¹²⁵ Sukumar Muralidharan (former deputy editor, *Frontline*) echoes Mini Menon’s (executive editor Bloomberg-UTV) view that the “Pakistan-China obsession with unresolved disputes” is a “historical legacy” that translates into media coverage.¹²⁶

Scholars analyse “news as a social construction of reality”¹²⁷ and argue that journalists work with what “they have inherited from their own cultures, with vital assumptions about the world built in.”¹²⁸ Research proves that “within a national tradition, there is a common news standard among journalists.”¹²⁹ So the alleged “chest thumping” by the media on issues related to Pakistan and China are coloured by

¹²³ Interview conducted with Suhasini Haidar , Senior Editor , CNN IBN on July 6, 2010, in New Delhi.

¹²⁴ Interview with Ambassador Leela Ponappa, IFS and former Dy National Security Advisor, on January 18 , 2012, in New Delhi.

¹²⁵ Interview with Professor DK Thussu, Director, Indian Media Centre , University of Westminster via e-mail on August 4, 2010.

¹²⁶ Interview with Mini Menon, Executive Editor Bloomberg-UTV, conducted via email on August 30, 2010 and Interview with Sukumar Muralidharan, Former Deputy Editor, *Frontline* (The Hindu) and current Program Manager, International Federation of Journalists, via email on September 9, 2010.

¹²⁷ Schudson, M. (2002), p. 260.

¹²⁸ Ibid. p. 262.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

“pre-existing sensitivities” and “conditioning” of journalistic frames.¹³⁰ According to Muralidharan, despite seeming to challenge the establishment, media still follows the official guidebook. “It provides space and time to a voluble group of what are called the “retirati”, Foreign Service officials who seek to keep up a public profile and influence policy choices after retirement. [...] But the opinions voiced by the “retirati” [...] are rarely out of the mould.”¹³¹

¹³⁰ Miller et al (1980), pp. (16-49).

¹³¹ Interview with Sukumar Muralidharan, Former Deputy Editor, *Frontline* (The Hindu) and current Program Manager, International Federation of Journalists, via email on September 9, 2010.

IV

THE BATTLE FOR INFLUENCE

4.1 Print More Credible than Television?

Most of the interviews I conducted while researching for this monograph seemed to suggest that while policymakers use the electronic media to generate public opinion, the written word was taken more seriously by the people. Veteran journalist BG Verghese, put it succinctly when he said:

TV is instant 24x7 coverage driven by ratings affects quality and competition and appears flippant. In addition in the absence of in house analysts; the panellists brought from the outside are always breathless, pressed for time, spouting instant wisdom and hearsay; coming across as shallow. The only achievement is the creation of the feeling of immediacy. Many of these experts are retired officials joining debates to stay relevant and in turn feed into the hysteria. Print on the other hand, at least in the olden days, had the possibility of more research and a studied report before the paper went to press; but TV does not have the luxury of time. However, there is now a new phenomenon emerging as well, news- papers following sound-byte journalism, making a statement rather than a fact a story. It's becoming entertainment rather than news.¹³²

Ambassador KC Singh was a little more brutal in his assessment when he said: "TV has come suddenly, it has no positive agenda. It can act as a silver bullet, but mostly has a negative impact on policy. Print has a lot more scope for analysis."¹³³ The comment is specially interesting

¹³² Interview conducted with veteran journalist BG Verghese on January 13, 2012.

¹³³ Interview conducted with Ambassador KC Singh (IFS), Former Secretary MEA on January 10, 2012.

since Ambassador Singh and Ambassador Leela Ponappa are the most frequently seen on all discussion on foreign policy across news channels.

Dr Sanjaya Baru takes a nuanced stand while elaborating that:

TV is a mass media and that translates into more importance than print. The print media has far superior journalists in Foreign policy and that is why the analysis is sound. Not many actually cover foreign policy consistently on Television. TV draws analysis and content from Print. So for instance if the PM is visiting China, one issues out topics on the agenda to the print media so analyses is well timed and then once the PM embarks on the visit the TV media are given more attention since they beam the pictures and hence generate public opinion and support.¹³⁴

In essence, the relationship is now symbiotic, even though in terms of academic influence on policymakers, the written word would perhaps greater impact than the spoken.

4.2 Domestic vs. Foreign Policy: Who Influences Who?

Having established that the media - both TV and print influence policy, the next question to ask is whether the impact is greater or equal in cases of domestic and foreign policy matters? NSA Shivshankar Menon, candidly admits that “the relationship between the media and policymaking is a manipulative relationship which is unfortunate. If the media projection is in line with the “desired outcome” then it suits both sides.”¹³⁵ Yet he clarifies that the “media’s impact in matters of domestic policy is far greater.”¹³⁶ Mahrukh Inayet, former senior news editor TIMES NOW, agrees that “the accessibility of the Indian politician – both for criticism and for praise – makes it impossible for

¹³⁴ Interview conducted with Dr Sanjaya Baru, eminent journalist and former media advisor to PM, on January 4, 2012.

¹³⁵ Interview with NSA and Former Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon conducted on July 8, 2010, at Ministry of Defence, South block, New Delhi.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

policies to stay out of the purview of media scrutiny. With scrutiny comes greater accountability and in the Indian case, the voter's greater sense of involvement."¹³⁷ Professor Thussu views this as a positive development, "despite the shrill element and often shallow nature, the debates and discussions broaden the public discourse and indirectly influence policies"¹³⁸ Case in point is the 2G spectrum scam; the Commonwealth Games exposé, and more recently the Lokpal Bill (Ombudsman bill) debate led by Anna Hazare.

These observations run contrary to the literature on the subject that indicates higher impact in foreign policy, owing to clear accountability.¹³⁹ Shivshankar Menon explains that "in the US the media is an integrated part of the foreign policy mechanism; in India that has not happened yet. The interest in foreign policy formulation is fleeting and focused at making headlines."¹⁴⁰ Diplomats, journalists and academics agree that lack of expertise has contributed to the perceived immaturity of the period. Mini Menon notes that, "while foreign policy debates have shifted to news studios there is actually very little real interface between the media editors and policy makers on real issues. Most often politicians and policy makers use the media for posturing."¹⁴¹

While the extent and independence of the influence is debatable, there is evidence to suggest that media has proactively also sought to shape policy environment. Track II diplomacy was initiated for the first time in 1999, when "the idea of the Lahore bus trip was mooted in an (newspaper) interview conducted with the then Prime Minister of

¹³⁷ Interview conducted with Mahrukh Inayet, Former Senior News Editor, TIMES NOW via e-mail on August 3, 2010.

¹³⁸ Interview with Professor DK Thussu, Director, Indian Media Centre, University of Westminster via e-mail on August 4, 2010.

¹³⁹ Walgrave et al (2004), Livingston, S. (1997) Miller, D. B (2007).

¹⁴⁰ Interview with NSA and Former Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon conducted on July 8, 2010, at Ministry of Defence, South block, New Delhi.

¹⁴¹ Interview with Mini Menon, Executive Editor Bloomberg-U'TV, conducted via email on August 30, 2010.

Pakistan Nawaz Sharif.”¹⁴² During the much hyped Indo-Pak Agra summit in 2001, NDTV’s current affairs talk show ‘We the People’ then airing on Star TV from Islamabad, explored the idea of Pakistan giving up its demand for a plebiscite and got Pakistanis to respond.”¹⁴³

Mini Menon reiterates, “we (in television) are still finding our feet. While the media is doing a great job being the voice of the people (in pockets) we are yet to lift up the debate to a level where we can actually play a part in policy formulation.”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Rai, A.K (2003), p. 25.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Mini Menon, Executive Editor Bloomberg-UTV, conducted via email on August 30, 2010.

V

TV AND FOREIGN POLICY: THE INDIAN EXPERIENCE

Having covered the evolution of the Indian media as an active policy formulation participant and having examined the literature available on international political communication, we can now apply the theoretical conclusions and empirical evaluations discussed previously, to recent foreign policy episodes and examines the extent and determinants of influence of news coverage.

5.1 Indo-Pak relations in the aftermath of the 26/11 Mumbai Terror Attacks (2008-2009)

Tragically, November 26, 2008 was Indian television's biggest story. The terrorist attacks on Mumbai, a 72-hour siege on India's financial capital left 179 people dead and a nation terrorised. Newsrooms did not stop beaming and India did not sleep. From the first pictures of the captured Pakistani terrorist Ajmal Kasab, to the final dossier of evidence that was sent to Pakistan - all the pieces of the jigsaw were put together by the media. As a news presenter and a copywriter, what was becoming obvious to me was the similarity pan-networks in tone and tenor of content (highly anti-Pakistan) and the sustained pressure on the Indian establishment to harden its stand. Media diplomacy was at play.

Sample this. Phase I began with Pakistan disowning captured terrorist Ajmal Kasab as its citizen and demanding concrete evidence from India. On December 22, 2008 came the first "news break". An MEA press release informed the media that Kasab had written to the Pakistani High Commissioner demanding legal assistance thus proving his nationality.¹⁴⁵ Islamabad responded immediately with the Pakistani

¹⁴⁵ TIMES NOW, Breaking News "Kasab : I am a Pakistani", December 22, 2008 , accessed as "Mumbai Terror Attack "India hands Kasab's letter to Pak high commission" URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDWFKVVpdbc> on August 30, 2010.

Interior Minister Rehman Malik calling the reports false.¹⁴⁶ Within 24 hours, CNN IBN had put out a report citing public anger over inaction and graphically represented what “India’s possible military options” were in case of a clash with Pakistan.¹⁴⁷ Both NDTV 24x7 and TIMES NOW were debating on “prime time” whether “a surgical strike option on Pakistan’s terror havens” would be a viable option.¹⁴⁸ The discussion involved panellists from both sides of the border; who ultimately argued against the aggressive posturing.¹⁴⁹ Here the media played two roles – first, it acted as a de facto hotline between two governments who were refusing to communicate directly; second - the discussions floated policy options before the government attempting to narrow down its choices.¹⁵⁰

Phase II began on January 5, 2009, when India’s then Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee announced that the 26/11 probe had furnished a dossier containing “incontrovertible” evidence pointing at terrorist masterminds operating from Pakistan. NDTV 24x7 ran a headline labelling it as “India’s biggest diplomatic offensive” showing Mukherjee emphasising that “India expects Pakistan to act on the evidence and respect bilateral agreements.”¹⁵¹ TIMES NOW had a detailed report

¹⁴⁶ TIMES NOW, December 23, 2008, “Pakistan disowns Kasab”, accessed as “Pakistan disowns Kasab”, URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0eJbpvk-kNU> on August 30, 2010.

¹⁴⁷ CNN IBN, December 22, 2008, “Public anger against inaction, What are India’s military options?” accessed on URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9RlXQsMHac&feature=related> on August 30, 2010.

¹⁴⁸ TIMES NOW, December 22, 2008 : News hour debate “Will Striking Pak solve things?”- URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJdi9g0eMa0&feature=channel> and NDTV 24x7, December 22, 2008 : Left, Right & Centre, “Is military strike against Pakistan an option?”- URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SsEMeb77zw&feature=related> on August 30, 2010.

¹⁴⁹ TIMES NOW, December 22, 2008: News hour debate “Will Striking Pak solve things?”- URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJdi9g0eMa0&feature=channel> and NDTV 24x7, December 22, 2008 : Left, Right & Centre, “Is military strike against Pakistan an option?”- URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SsEMeb77zw&feature=related> on August 30, 2010.

¹⁵⁰ Gilboa, E. (2002), pp.(193-208) and Linsky quoted in Basu, P.P (2003), p. 21.

¹⁵¹ NDTV 24x7, January 5, 2009; “India’s biggest diplomatic offensive” accessed as “India gives 26/11 proof to Pak” URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYcBwOntqHI> on August 30, 2010.

on the dossier and a debate headlined as “Evidence given, now what?”- almost prodding the establishment to come up with a response.¹⁵² The drama escalated when Pakistan’s NSA Mahmud Ali Durrani spoke to CNN IBN and accepted Kasab’s nationality.¹⁵³ Within hours he was sacked by a livid Pakistani PM Yousuf Raza Gilani for breach of protocol. Gilani in his statement finally accepted Kasab’s citizenship.¹⁵⁴ The Indian media had handed New Delhi a diplomatic victory. It used its agency - to quote Naveh - for “creating partially an environment” for foreign policy negotiations to take place and used its weight as an “international political broker” to “speed up the process”.¹⁵⁵

Again Islamabad rejected India’s evidence as not credible. Using the forum of TIMES NOW’s show “Frankly Speaking”, Pranab Mukherjee lashed out at Pakistan for not following words up with action and sent out an appeal to the international community to build pressure on Pakistan.¹⁵⁶ The Foreign Minister was in conversation with TIMES NOW Editor-in-Chief Arnab Goswami, who interestingly, posited the question on “behalf of the people of India who want to know where the government stands on this issue with Pakistan?”¹⁵⁷ Two things were happening here. First, the media was enunciating its role as the voice and shaper of public opinion. Second, was the acknowledgement by the establishment that news coverage influences public opinion and hence the appeal to garner legitimacy for New Delhi’s actions.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵² TIMES NOW, January 5, 2009, News hour debate “Evidence given, now what?” accessed as “The Newshour debate: evidence given now what?” URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4RakbvnOu-Y&feature=fvsvr> on August 30, 2010.

¹⁵³ CNN IBN, January 7, 2009, India @ 9; “exclusive interview with Pakistan’s National Security Advisor”, URL: <http://il.youtube.com/watch?v=bMBomS5fPvg&feature=related> on August 30, 2010.

¹⁵⁴ TIMES NOW, January 7, 2009, “Bowing to truth, Pak says Kasab is ours” URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FpNe-nKwd6Q&feature=channel> on August 30, 2010.

¹⁵⁵ Linsky quoted in Basu, P.P (2003), p. 21, Seib, P. (1997), Miller, D.B (2007) , Gilboa, E. (2003), Naveh, C. (2002).

¹⁵⁶ TIMES NOW, January 8, 2009, Pranab Mukherjee, then External Affairs Minister on ‘Frankly Speaking’ with Arnab Goswami; URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QE-o4lspdM4&feature=channel> on August 30, 2010.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Seib, P. (1997), p. 29 and Naveh, C. (2002), p. 10.

So despite “indexing” of the report on elite discourse media is seen as generating influence.¹⁵⁹

Phase II saw what was perhaps the biggest criticism heaped on PM Manmohan Singh for what is now infamous as “the Sharm-el-Sheikh fiasco.” The PM met his Pakistani counterpart on the sidelines of the NAM (Non-Aligned Movement) summit in Egypt in July 2009. In the joint statement issued, PM Singh looking to calm tensions acknowledged Pakistan’s claims of India’s involvement in the troubled Balochistan region, even as Pakistan made no new commitments on the 26/11 probe.¹⁶⁰ The backlash was severe. CNN IBN’s discussion was entitled “Is the PM facing nation’s trust deficit”, while TIMES NOW debated if “Pakistan had walked away with too much?”¹⁶¹ On his return the PM sought to repair the damage. In a televised statement in Parliament he clarified, “I wish to reiterate that the President and the PM of Pakistan know, after our recent meetings, that we can have a meaningful dialogue with Pakistan only if they fulfil their commitment, in letter and spirit, not to allow their territory to be used in any manner for terrorist activities against India.”¹⁶²

In analysis, NSA Shivshankar Menon, the then Foreign Secretary, discounts any media impact calling it “a projection of the government’s point of view” and denies “any change in policy towards Pakistan.”¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Miller, D.B (2007), p. 197.

¹⁶⁰ Parthasarthy, G. “Sell out at Sharm-el-Sheikh”, July 23, 2009 accessed on, URL: <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/2009/07/23/stories/2009072350190800.htm> on August 5, 2010.

¹⁶¹ CNN IBN, July 17, 2009, Face the Nation, “Is PM Facing Nation’s trust deficit?” URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lfzB80b9JKw&feature=related>; TIMES NOW, The News Hour Debate “Has Pak walked away with too much?”, July 17, 2009, URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y49be09uKrY&feature=channel> on August 30, 2010.

¹⁶² Prime Minister’s statement in Lok Sabha on the debate on the PM’s recent visit’s abroad on July 29, 2009, transcript accessed on Speeches and statements, www.mea.gov.in on August 10, 2010.

¹⁶³ Interview with NSA and Former Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon conducted on July 8, 2010 at Ministry of Defence, South Block, New Delhi.

The journalists in contrast, agree that status quo was challenged. Mahrukh Inayet observes:

The Sharm-el-Sheikh fiasco is the most appropriate example of how the UPA government gauged through the media, the country's anger over agreeing to talks with Pakistan sans action on 26/11. It immediately changed its tonality in discussions and developed a rigid stand overnight; suspending the composite dialogue which till date remains a work in progress.¹⁶⁴

Mini Menon characterises the media's role as "rabble rousing from the foreign policy point of view [...] affecting internal policy more than external one."¹⁶⁵ Suhasini Haidar paints the bigger picture arguing that the "naming and shaming" cost India diplomatically. "India lost a window of opportunity with Pakistan and hence when Obama charted out the initial AFPAK agenda for Afghanistan, India was sidelined."¹⁶⁶ An example that critics like Gilboa will cite as the time constraints imposed by "real time coverage". B.G. Verghese agrees with this assessment saying:

In my opinion the joint statement at Sharm-el-sheikh was a smart move for PM to make since it gave Pak an exit route at that point of time. We had learnt our lessons from *Op Parakram*, that while in theory it looked good, coercive diplomacy came at a price. But the media coverage was negative and impeded talks.¹⁶⁷

On the other hand, Sukumar Muralidharan believes, that the media has no "agenda setting power" in foreign policy. "Where the policy

¹⁶⁴ Interview conducted with Mahrukh Inayet, Former Senior News Editor, TIMES NOW via e-mail on August 3, 2010.

¹⁶⁵ Interview with Mini Menon, News Editor Bloomberg-UTV, conducted via e-mail on August 30, 2010.

¹⁶⁶ Interview conducted with Suhasini Haidar, Senior Editor, CNN IBN on July 6, 2010 in New Delhi.

¹⁶⁷ Interview with BG Verghese, veteran Journalist conducted on January 13, 2012 in New Delhi.

establishment is divided, the media reflects these divisions.”¹⁶⁸ He recounts:

At the Havana NAM in 2006, India and Pakistan agreed to institute a joint anti-terrorism mechanism. This obviously went contrary to sentiment within the policy establishment that India was the party aggrieved by terrorism and that Pakistan was its origin. Similarly, at Sharm-el-Sheikh, a joint determination to combat terrorism was reiterated and India took note of Balochistan. Again, this move was a departure from the norm, since the mainstream of the Indian policy establishment concedes no such involvement in Balochistan.¹⁶⁹

Dr Baru believes there is a systemic problem:

I maintain that Indo-Pak relationship is distinctively a domestic concern not a foreign policy issue. Both the coverage and the concerns vis-à-vis the relationship are tainted by a domestic approach. Neither has the media nor have political actors developed the maturity to see this as just a bilateral issue.¹⁷⁰

The jury is still out on whether the media “independently” influenced MEA’s reactions to Islamabad; it is clear that it was not a passive actor. This crisis fulfilled most conditions contingent for media influence. The 26/11 terror strikes were a horrifying yet “spectacular incident” where the media acted as the “main source of information and interpretation.”¹⁷¹ India’s bitter history with Pakistan is an issue with “pre-existing sensitivities” and so the influence of media discourse on

¹⁶⁸ Interview with Sukumar Muralidharan, Former Deputy Editor, Frontline (The Hindu) and current Program Manager, International Federation of Journalists, via email on September 9, 2010.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Interview conducted with Dr. Sanjaya Baru, eminent journalist and former media advisor to PM on January 4, 2012 in New Delhi.

¹⁷¹ Wood, D. and Peake, J. (1998), p. 182, Walgrave et al (2004), Cobb, R. and Elder, T. (1971).

¹⁷² Miller, A et al (1980), p. 45.

public opinion is a given.¹⁷² The “non-stop” coverage and follow up of a tragic incident (negative news) had policy makers shaken and unprepared (lacking clarity).¹⁷³ The “unambiguous” reportage saw media prodding the authorities to take a hard-line on issues, even if it was impacting the “symbolic agenda” with the suspension of talks.¹⁷⁴

5.2 “Aman Ki Asha” (Hope For Peace) - A TRACK II Initiative

As television whipped up debates ad nauseam, the print media explored a new avenue for media’s agency with the “Aman ki Asha campaign” a joint peace initiative by the *Times of India*-(TOI) the country’s most powerful media empire ; and the *Jang* group- Pakistan’s most influential Urdu newspaper. The joint statement reads: “it is one of history’s ironies that a people who share so much, refuse to acknowledge their similarities and focus so avidly on their differences. We believe it is time to restore the equilibrium. Public opinion is far too potent a force to be left in the hands of narrow vested interests.”¹⁷⁵

The campaign was viewed as a “Track II channel looking to improve diplomatic and cultural relations with Pakistan.”¹⁷⁶ The Centre for Indian Industry (CII) hosted an Indo-Pak business forum between May 18-19, 2010, where a 65 member Pakistani delegation visited New Delhi and met the finance minister to draft new trade ties.¹⁷⁷ Cultural programmes involving musicians and artists, retrospective discussions with journalists from both sides of the border and debates on restrictive

¹⁷³ Walgrave et al (2006) pp. (92-93), Seib, P. (1997), p. 143, Proress et al (1987), Baumgartner et al (1997), Walgrave et al (2004), Basu, P.P (2003), Miller, D.B (2007) , Gilboa, E. (2003), Naveh, C. (2002).

¹⁷⁴ Walgrave et al (2006), pp. (92-93), Walgrave et al (2004), p. 13, Seib, P. (1997), p. 143, Proress (1987).

¹⁷⁵ “The Idea whose time has come” – Joint statement by TOI and Jung announcing launch of aman ki ashah ; accessed on URL <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/amankiasharticleshow/5621301.cms> on August 5, 2010.

¹⁷⁶ “Aman Ki Asha: Stars are aligned”, Mani, R. February 27, 2010 for www.opendemocracy.net; accessed on URL: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/rakeshmani/aman-ki-asha-stars-are-aligned> on August 5, 2010.

¹⁷⁷ CII Communique ; June 2010, Volume 19 (6), accessed on URL : www.cii.in/webcms/Upload/Communique%20June2010%20763.pdf on August 5, 2010.

visa regulations were part of the ongoing event. Journalists agree that it helped “calm extreme voices on both sides of the border”¹⁷⁸ and was believed to have “a definite nod from the higher echelons of power both in New Delhi and Islamabad.”¹⁷⁹

The statement by Rahul Kansal, chief marketing officer, TOI, is telling. He says “overall, as a brand we’ve come to realise that newspapers have confined themselves in narrow boxes for too long, through passive reporting. Hence, the need to take a leadership position to fill that vacuum.”¹⁸⁰ While the ambitious marketing strategy is not concealed; Kansal’s statement reinforces media’s self perception as an opinion-shaper in society. He adds, “we intend to involve senior leaders from the governments of both countries as well. But at its heart, it is a people-to-people campaign.”¹⁸¹ Here he is elaborating on the medium’s perceived legitimacy to involve government officials as well as influence public discourse and also acting as the “third party negotiator” to build consensus and common ground; contributing to an environment for policy formulation to proceed.¹⁸²

It seems anomalous that the Times Group could take two almost opposing lines in different mediums. While the TOI promoted Track II diplomacy, the sister television network TIMES NOW, essayed the role of a pressure group forcing the government to take a hard-line approach on talks. A senior editor at the TOI desk draws the distinction, stating off the record “that the campaign was most likely conceptualised as a marketing initiative, since the TOI editorials continued to take a very hard line on MEA’s handling of the crisis with Pakistan and there was no real clash in ideology”. However the campaign conforms to

¹⁷⁸ Interview conducted with Suhasini Haidar , Senior Editor , CNN IBN on July 6, 2010 in New Delhi.

¹⁷⁹ “Aman Ki Asha: Stars are aligned”, Mani, R. February 27, 2010 for www.opendemocracy.net; accessed on URL: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/rakeshmani/aman-ki-asha-stars-are-aligned> on August 5, 2010.

¹⁸⁰ “Taproot gives wings to TOI’s ‘Aman ki ashah’ campaign”, A. Chaudhri, ; January 6, 2010, accessed on URL <http://www.campaignindia.in/Article/227554,taproot-gives-wings-to-tois-aman-ki-asha-campaign.aspx> on August 5, 2010.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Gilboa, E. (2002) pp. (193-208).

Gilboa's description of a "spectacular celebration of peacemaking" useful "in promoting negotiations and working towards peace agreements and building confidence."¹⁸³

5.3 The Indo-US Nuclear Deal (2005-2008)

It was three years in the making, and when it was finally concluded in October 2008 it became infamous as the "prime time deal"¹⁸⁴; which forced the government of the day to go through a trust vote and even exposed the Indian Parliament to the "cash-for-votes" scandal. It is perhaps the best example of a foreign policy decision which was technical to the core when initiated, but became a strategic pay off that was misunderstood due to mismanagement of information and ended murkily with a high degree of politicisation.

The media's role here was that of a feedback mechanism and an 'opinion builder' but which ironically ended up - especially in the case of television – as that of a hysterical cheerleader. This episode brought out the vulnerabilities of a less than informed media whose penchant for sensational sound bytes cost it the real story and made it dependent on government sources for information and was influenced greatly by the positive attitude of the Indian public towards the US in its subsequent presentation. While the politicisation of the deal, gave the media more fodder, "it ironically helped the Indian govt clear hurdles domestically."¹⁸⁵

Vidya Shankar Aiyar, a broadcast journalist formerly with CNN IBN has captured the essence of the coverage of the deal by the Indian media in its three distinct phases. The first lapses with the text of the 123 Agreement being finalised on July 20, 2007. The second phase sees the domestic politicisation of the issue in the form of the gradual separation of the Left from the government culminating in the Trust vote which was won by Dr Manmohan Singh in Parliament in July 2008. The third phase sees the deal's actual passage at the Nuclear

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ "Prime Time Deal", Aiyar, V.S in Chari, P. (edited) (2009) "Indo US Nuclear Deal: Seeking Synergy in Bilateralism".

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. p. 32.

Suppliers Group (NSG) and the US Congress till it is finally signed in Washington DC. on October 10, 2008.¹⁸⁶ The subsequent implementation of the deal and its current coverage will not be dealt with in this monograph.

He argues like many other analysts, in retrospect, that the Indo-US Nuclear Deal would not have been a reality but for US President George W. Bush's persistence, that was backed by an eager political leadership, and the media here was only a convenient platform and not an independent actor. In fact in the first phase in 2005; when Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice made a historic trip to India; she had set the tone for the future engagement. The press briefing by the Bush administration officials outlines that it was conveyed to the Indian PM that "the US President and Secretary (had) developed an outline for a decisively broader strategic relationship. [...] Its goal is to help India become a major world power in the 21st century."¹⁸⁷ This statement, a monumental one at that; was given the complete miss.

This was because; the Indian media was having a field day discussing the US objections to the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline and the US decision to sell F16s to Pakistan. This despite Condoleeza Rice making a "clear pitch for talks on civil nuclear energy co-operation" in her opening remarks in Hyderabad House.¹⁸⁸ Of course, it also did not help, that the MEA had chosen to underplay the statement instead focusing on the phone call between President Bush and the PM, where Dr Singh had expressed his disappointment on the sale of F16s to Pakistan. The MEA spokesperson mentioned in passing that: "the US has conveyed that it intends to upgrade the Indo-US Strategic Partnership and a number of initiatives have been announced in this regard."¹⁸⁹ Since the MEA had underplayed it as perhaps a time buying tactic, a mainstay of the Indian media was happily playing out the controversy.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Administration official on "Background briefing by Administration Officials on US-South Asia relations", Office of Spokesman, Washington DC. on March 25, 2005; quoted in "*Prime Time Deal*", Aiyar, V.S in Chari, P. (edited) (2009) "Indo US Nuclear Deal: Seeking Synergy in Bilateralism", p. 33.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. p. 35.

¹⁸⁹ MEA spokesperson, March 26, 2005, quoted in "*Prime Time Deal*", Aiyar, V.S (2009), p. 35.

Interestingly in an interview to NDTV 24x7,¹⁹⁰ Ms. Rice reiterated that the US was aware of the growing energy needs of India and “we’ve completed Phase I of the NSSP (Next Steps of Strategic Partnership), we now need for Phase II- for there to be legislation here in India.”¹⁹¹ This sound byte was lost in the din of the controversial F-16 sale to Pakistan and the IPI (Iran-Pakistan-India) pipeline which became the focus of the interview. Case in point: the media coverage obviously bordered on the sensational since Pakistan is always more of domestic story in India and will get the eyeballs. Second; the absence of in-house experts and the reliance on sources within the MEA meant that the most obvious “shift in US foreign policy was not entirely grasped.”¹⁹²

The next phase of media coverage saw the Indian government suddenly recognising the potential of the US initiative and repositioning the deal from an “upgrade in relations” to a “historic new commitment”. This is when one saw complex jargon of ‘The 123 Agreement’, as the clincher of this “historic deal” finding repeated mention in the media. “Strong export control Indian laws, separation of civilian and military nuclear facilities in India and a dedicated facility for reprocessing spent US fuel”¹⁹³ were the cornerstones of the agreement signed by Rice and then Foreign Minister Mukherjee on July 27, 2007. Even here, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Nicholas Burns came out an hour and a half after the joint agreement and held a debrief in Washington, revealing a lot more about the detailed follow up initiated by Secretary Rice to ensure Indian compliance, that would take the engagement forward. In contrast the Indian government once again kept the details vague, arguing that the US had insisted on the text of the agreement being kept under wraps.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ It’s crucial to add the caveat that in the phase between 2005-2006, NDTV was the lone Indian English news network (among those being examined in this paper) “on air”, CNN IBN & TIMES NOW only operationalised in 2006.

¹⁹¹ Former US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, on Interview with NDTV 24x7, March 16, 2005, Ibid. p. 36.

¹⁹² Aiyar, V.S (2009), p. 36.

¹⁹³ Ibid. p. 38.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. p. 39.

In the absence of in-house experts, television ad libbed what the print media had deconstructed. As Ambassador KC Singh points out “it was the print media that analysed the deal in its true text, especially journalists like the *Hindu’s* Siddhartha Vardharajan; it was too complex an issue for TV to handle.”¹⁹⁵ This is not to say that there were no panel discussions with proponents for and against the deal, NDTV 24x7 debated “The Nuclear Battle” and how a “Roll back on N-deal would hurt UPA-1” with guests like Shashi Tharoor, then UN Undersecretary General, claiming the “indecisiveness and fractiousness of the Indian polity had embarrassed India on the world stage, since the deal was as good as it gets, the US was astonished that it was India that was walking away.”¹⁹⁶ The other two channels examined in this monograph were still in their initial phases of operation and had limited programming.

It was in the second phase leading up to the trust vote in Parliament in 2008, when the story and the deal became truly political that prime-time coverage shot up and so did the viewer interest. With the Left, an ally of UPA-I, threatening to derail the deal, the Congress was looking at a new alliance with the Samajwadi Party. The new political arrangements were discussed threadbare at prime-time and the pros and cons of the deal were put on the backburner. From then on, it was BJP gunning for the Congress and vice-versa; with spokespersons battling it out on all channels at 9 pm prime, because after all, the government’s life was at stake.

This was also a time when the political upheaval forced the reticent PM to open up to the country about his convictions regarding deal and to save his government; for now, public opinion and the platform it was created on mattered. On July 15, 2008, a week before his government faced the trust vote in Parliament, Dr. Manmohan Singh met with a small group of editors from leading media houses to explain his stand. Barkha Dutt, Group Editor NDTV 24x7 went “ON AIR” with a story captioned “A Confident Manmohan”, explaining that the

¹⁹⁵ Interview conducted with Ambassador KC Singh, IFS and Former Foreign Secretary on January 10, 2012 in New Delhi.

¹⁹⁶ “N-deal roll back: Image hurt” We the People, NDTV 24x7, October 27, 2007, accessed on URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H2V8DTeRO_w, on January 17, 2012.

PM had conveyed to her and the group of editors that the: “Nuclear deal was beneficial for India and he was confident that his government would win the trust vote and that this strategic engagement would not hamper India’s foreign policy.”¹⁹⁷

This battle for ‘perception advantage’ came too late in the day, argues Ambassador Leela Ponappa, “the government handled the management of information poorly. The merits of the deal far outweighed the demerits and the situation of a trust vote should have never cropped up.”¹⁹⁸ But Dr Sanjaya Baru, the then Media Advisor to the PM disagrees and says the government ran a successful perception campaign. He argues that: “More than print, television played an extremely influential role in generating public support for the nuclear deal. No major TV news channel campaigned against the agreement, while many took a strong supportive stance.”¹⁹⁹ How this was engineered will be elaborated upon in the following sections.

Despite not much of an opposition in the media to the deal, the government saw itself hanging by a thread when it won the trust vote in the Parliament on July 22, 2008. TV once again brought controversy into the House when CNN IBN allegedly found itself an “unwilling partner in conducting a sting operation in the cash for vote scam (with BJP MPs walking into the well of the house with wads of cash accusing the govt of buying its way out of the trust vote).”²⁰⁰

The end result was a mixed bag of headlines, “Victory Amid Parliament’s Shame” was the banner caption of the show “And the winner is...” on NDTV 24x7 where editor-in-chief Dr. Prannoy Roy and Barkha Dutt discussed the trust vote at 9 pm with Shekhar Gupta, editor of the *Indian Express*. The consensus, both on TV and in newspapers, was

¹⁹⁷ “A Confident Manmohan”, NDTV 24x7, July 15,2008, available as “PM meets editors over trust vote, nuke deal” accessed on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0ccFgPqnLM>, on January 16,2012.

¹⁹⁸ Interview with Ambassador Leela Ponappa, IFS and Former Dy National Security Advisor, on January 18, 2012 in New Delhi.

¹⁹⁹ “The influence of business and media on Indian Foreign Policy” Baru, S., *India Review*, Vol 8, no 3, July-September 2009, pp. (266-285).

²⁰⁰ Aiyar, V.S (2009), p. 44.

that the two images that would remain etched in public memory were one of the “emphatic victory sign flashed by the PM after the trust vote win and the second of the wad of notes flashed by BJP MPs in the well of the house.”²⁰¹ The nuclear deal was now in motion, yet it was the politics that was debated not its text.

Finally, in the third phase, that is the deal clearing the IAEA stage, the NSG and the US Congress- television media coverage, it is argued, was much like “the race to the finish line” and “the sequence of events culminating in the US Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice and India’s then Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee, signing the deal, unfolded like a thriller.”²⁰² This author would agree, for when the story broke on October 10, 2008, I was “ON AIR” on TIMES NOW and all the news delivered was captioned and headlined as “Historic Deal Done”, and breathlessly covered every aspect from the NSG approval to the IAEA nod in Vienna and the negotiations in the US Congress. But nevertheless, one could argue, it was historic and it was a big deal despite the superficial coverage.

What had however gone unnoticed, was the “US assertion that assurances of fuel supply in the 123 agreement were not binding legally” but were “solemn Presidential commitments the administration intends to uphold.”²⁰³ This had cropped up as a “secret Bush letter” on the eve of the NSG clearance in Vienna (which was to waive off NPT conditions for India) which stated that Washington DC., will immediately halt nuclear trade with India if New Delhi conducts a nuclear test; that too a written assurance between the US state department and the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.²⁰⁴ Yet after a few denials by the government, the media was happy to ask “when the deal was going to be signed.”²⁰⁵

²⁰¹ “And the Winner is..” With Dr Prannoy Roy and Barkha Dutt , NDTV 24x7 on July 22,2008, accessed on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QffWyt7SY-8> on January 18, 2012.

²⁰² Aiyar, V.S (2009), p. 33.

²⁰³ Ibid. p. 45.

²⁰⁴ “Secret letters say US will pull out of deal if India tests”, September 3, 2008, accessed on URL: <http://www.rediff.com/news/2008/sep/03ndeal1.htm> on January 18, 2012.

²⁰⁵ Aiyar, V.S (2009), p. 45.

Dr. Sanjaya Baru adds another angle to this highly divisive debate, when he says that as advisor to the PM during the crucial stage of the deal, he was able to easily channel the debate to the government's advantage.

Let me start with the end result of my strategy. The entire TV media was in support of the Nuclear Deal. All major newspapers TOI, IE, ET, HT were also on board. By 2007 as media advisor to the PM, I was successfully able to channel all the dissent against the deal into two mainstream newspapers – *The Hindu* and *The Asian Age*. N Ram (editor of the *Hindu*) due to his affiliations to the Left and close ties with Prakash Karat had his reasons to write against the deal. MJ Akbar of the *Asian Age*, had a theory that Muslims in the country would oppose the deal (and was consequently proved wrong by the 2009 elections) and hence wrote against the deal.

Having the media on board was important as it was playing an important role of being the bearer of public opinion which in this case was in favour of the deal. Apart from the media it was also important to get the business lobby on board. In India, fear of China exists to the greatest extent in the minds of the business community, its fear of competition and not an ideological battle. The business community took a favourable view of building a symbiotic relationship with the US. So once they were on board they worked the system, because after all political parties are dependent on funding by the business community.

One also had to think differently. Karan Thapar does a show called India Tonight @10 on a business channel. I got in touch with him to hold discussions addressing concerns and explaining the fine print of the deal to the business viewers with a series of shows with nuclear experts including the likes of the late K Subramaniam. This worked to our advantage.²⁰⁶

Perhaps the strategising only kicked in the third phase of hectic parleys of the deal, but the point remains that in terms of policy formulation, the media in this entire episode only acted as first, an informant, then a

²⁰⁶ Interview with Dr Sanjaya Baru, eminent journalist and former media advisor to PM, conducted on January 4, 2012 in New Delhi.

platform for debate and dissent and finally a feedback mechanism of the public support for a policy decision, without any independent agency. In the short term it may have delayed the deal due to its ignorance of technical issues and later contributed to the politicisation of the deal, only to finally end up cheerleading for the agreement when opinion polls showed that the Indian public had warmed to relations with the US.²⁰⁷

In terms of conditions of influence there was little room to manoeuvre since : 1) the government, once decided, was firm on its policy and there was no vacuum in decision-making that the media could fill, 2) the media feedback only affected policymakers during the politicisation of the deal domestically, due to “non stop media coverage” and the “negative” turn of events and, 3) public opinion was firmly for Indo-US relations and eventually the media was made an ally in the deal.

5.4 The ‘Race Row’ in Australia

I remember vividly a dry news day in May 2009, when the editor at the TIMES NOW news desk was livid at the lack of reaction of the team to a story with “enormous potential”. An Indian student had been stabbed in Australia and we had treated it as a routine crime report. Within an hour the call was taken to make it the biggest story of the day with “racism” as an angle. The target was to assess the contribution of Indian students to Australia’s education industry, get reactions from concerned Indian parents who had children studying down under, and eliciting a response from the MEA. The reactions did come and soon there was a sudden influx of reports on news wires and frantic calls from student unions feeding information regarding other similar attacks.

Other networks were forced to follow the “Race attacks down under”. On May 28, 2009, TIMES NOW ran a discussion on “Racist Wave Down Under? The Australian government reacts to TIMES NOW Report.” The Australian High Commissioner John McCarthy was grilled on prime time over Australia’s response to the rise in “race attacks” and was prodded to admit “I cannot assure you a blanket guarantee

²⁰⁷ Kapur, D. “Public Opinion and Indian Foreign Policy”, *India Review* Vol 8, No 3, July-September 2009, pp. (286-305), quotes a poll done by Lokniti and CNN IBN.

that there will be no more crimes, but certainly we will spare no effort to prevent the recounts of such incidents.”²⁰⁸ Within 24 hours the Indian Foreign Minister SM Krishna told the media that India had been assured that “our students will be protected” followed by a press statement from the Australian PM Kevin Rudd condemning the attacks.²⁰⁹ The same evening, the Minister for Overseas Affairs, Vayalar Ravi appeared on TIMES NOW’s 9 PM, debate headlined “Finally India piles on the pressure”; acknowledging that the MEA’s response was triggered by the media coverage and emphasised that it “was now time for acting and not just reacting.”²¹⁰ NDTV 24x7 on “We The People” tried to debate the allegations that “the Indian media was being jingoistic for highlighting an issue that has been around”; but the opinions expressed by the public on the show were already hardened.²¹¹ A senior editor at TIMES NOW observed off the record that:

The channel single-handedly set the agenda on the race row story. In fact student associations in Melbourne rung up the input desk when they planned to hold a large scale rally wanting confirmation of media coverage. The government was left with no choice but to respond.

Seib notes, “news coverage can stimulate outrage and galvanise a sluggish bureaucracy [...] when viewers don’t see the story, legislators and policy makers don’t hear about the issue.”²¹² The Australian case

²⁰⁸ TIMES NOW May 28, 2009, News Hour Debate “Australian Govt Reacts to TIMES NOW report” accessed on URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L7CJZlq61Gw&feature=channel> on August 30, 2010.

²⁰⁹ TIMES NOW May 29, 2009, “Indian High Commissioner meets Aus PM” accessed on URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=50w_URnEwU0&feature=related; and TIMES NOW, May 29 “Aus PM condemns race attacks” accessed URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oyHTCdLkYmQ> on August 30, 2010.

²¹⁰ TIMES NOW May 29, 2009, The News Hour Debate : News Hour Exclusive; “Finally India Piles on the Pressure”; accessed on URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZpzoFCA830&feature=related> on August 30, 2010.

²¹¹ “We the People” NDTV 24x7, June 7, 2009, debating “Indians : double standards on racism ?” accessed on URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOZRykG7IuY&feature=channel> on August 30, 2010.

²¹² Seib, P. (1997), p. 91.

study was the perfect case in point. The “race attacks” had surfaced just a year after the Indian cricket team’s tour down under was almost called off after “a race row”.²¹³ The conditions indicative of media influence are obvious – sustained, negative news coverage interacting with pre-existing sensitivities, thereby pushing “decision making up higher levels of bureaucracy”.²¹⁴ The public opinion here was overwhelmingly sensitised. On June 11, 2009, the Indian PM went on record appealing to the media to tone down its coverage and “be mindful of the students of Indian origin who may willy-nilly become the victims of racial intolerance.”²¹⁵ Despite the official restraint projected, the sustained coverage between May-August 2009, had forced SM Krishna to plan a visit to Sydney to convey India’s displeasure and extract a commitment from the Australian government.²¹⁶ Dr Baru observes “this episode was a pure media creation that went out of control.”²¹⁷

The media’s agency as a “participant” had three dimensions: 1) stimulator as well as ventilator of public opinion on foreign policy, 2) as a platform for debates on aspects of policy, and 3) acting as a key opinion-maker.²¹⁸

So was there a substantive impact of the coverage on India’s foreign policy towards Australia? Mahrukh Inayet explains, “this is a classic example of no matter how much the media tried to play it – the spate of attacks did not really turn into a diplomatic incident. New Delhi

²¹³ “India suspends tour over race row”, January 7, 2008, www.news.sky.com, accessed on URL <http://news.sky.com/skynews/Home/Sky-News-Archive/Article/20080641299499> on August 6, 2010.

²¹⁴ Miller, A et al (1980), p. 16 and Seib, P. (1997), p. 91, Linsky quoted in Basu, P.P (2003), p. 21, Miller, D.B (2007), Gilboa, E. (2003), Naveh, C. (2002).

²¹⁵ PM Manmohan Singh addressing the Indian Parliament on June 11, 2009, on Lok Sabha TV, accessed on URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urZuNf6HYps&feature=related> on August 30, 2010.

²¹⁶ TIMES NOW, August 5, 2008, “Krishna in Aus: Racist attacks top agenda”, accessed on URL : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4C4XyIywQQ&feature=channel> on August 30, 2010.

²¹⁷ Interview with Dr Sanjaya Baru, eminent journalist and former media advisor to PM, conducted on January 4, 2012.

²¹⁸ Basu, P.P (2003), p. 29.

went out of its way to describe most of the incidents as ‘crimes’ other than race-related.”²¹⁹ Suhasini Haidar adds:

The attacks covered extensively forced foreign minister level responses which were quite unprecedented before the time of TV. There was a direct impact in terms of day to day relations. The negative aspect was that the government of the day got so caught up in dealing with the violence that it ignored discussions vis-a-vis the tight visa laws. Australia walked away with harder control because the Indian government was only focused on the media outcry.²²⁰

Sukumar Muralidharan criticises the “episodic coverage” saying “the issue has since vanished from the public discourse [...] with no analytical article on the phenomenon of racism in Australia. We should remember that the Australian universities are big advertisers in the Indian media.”²²¹ Seib’s hypothesis on “superficial coverage resulting in superficial policy” is confirmed.²²²

5.5 Indo-China border dispute (2006-2009)

Scholars have often written about the “centrality and intractability” of the unresolved border dispute in the cautious yet tense Sino-Indian relations.²²³ The media’s role in this relationship has been that of a “critical observer”, asking the hard questions, interpreting and analysing government action and trying to read between the lines. India formalised its strategic co-operation with China in 2005. The thaw in the ties was conspicuous - Beijing recognised Sikkim as an Indian state and welcomed India as an Observer at the Shanghai Corporation Organisation.²²⁴ In November 2006, just a week before Chinese

²¹⁹ Interview conducted with Mahrukh Inayet, Former Senior News Editor, TIMES NOW via e-mail on August 3, 2010.

²²⁰ Interview conducted with Suhasini Haidar, Senior Editor, CNN IBN on July 6, 2010, in New Delhi.

²²¹ Interview with Sukumar Muralidharan, Former Deputy Editor, Frontline (The Hindu) and current Program Manager, International Federation of Journalists, via email on September 9, 2010.

²²² Seib, P. (1997).

²²³ Ganguly, S. (2010), p. 5.

²²⁴ Ibid. p. 102.

President Hu Jintao's visit to New Delhi, the Chinese Ambassador to India created a diplomatic furore by reiterating Beijing's claims on Arunachal Pradesh.²²⁵ The MEA refused to react and dismissed the remarks. The issue was acknowledged only at the end of the visit, when the then Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee told the Parliament that:

I unambiguously rejected the Chinese (envoy's) contention, stating that Arunachal Pradesh is an integral part of India [...] the matter was taken up immediately with the Chinese government through our Ambassador in Beijing and our disappointment and concern [...] clearly conveyed.²²⁶

It is argued that "for journalists' news is intrinsically episodic", on the other hand for policymakers, "such fragmentation is not good policy."²²⁷ The quiet diplomacy at work in this case became obvious when Shivshankar Menon, the then Foreign Secretary, announced that during President Hu Jintao's visit, that China had promised not to block India's entry into the United Nations Security Council.²²⁸

Sino-Indian relations grabbed the media spotlight once again between August-September 2009. TIMES NOW first picked up a report on how a Chinese blogspot recommending the "balkanisation of India" as strategic priority was reproduced by a Beijing think tank on August 13, 2009. TIMES NOW's news debate was headlined "Is there now a pattern to deliberate provocation by China? Should we stare back?"²²⁹ Editor-in-chief, Arnab Goswami opened the show, saying: "Let's be clear there is no freedom of speech and democracy in China that a

²²⁵ Guha, S., November 13, 2006, "China claims Arunachal as Chinese territory" http://www.dnaindia.com/world/report_china-claims-arunachal-pradesh-as-chinese-territory_1063888 on August 5, 2010.

²²⁶ Suo Moto statement by Shri Pranab Mukherjee, Minister of External Affairs on 'Chinese President's visit to India' in Rajya Sabha on 28/11/2006, accessed on URL: www.mea.gov.in on August 5, 2010.

²²⁷ Seib, P. (1997), p. 151.

²²⁸ Ganguly, S. (2010), p. 102.

²²⁹ TIMES NOW, News Hour Special "Is there now a pattern to deliberate provocation by China?", August 13, 2009 URL: accessed on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJYzxfiMPjI&feature=channel> on August 30, 2010.

person can write an article and go underground” – suggesting that the blog was indeed an act of provocation.²³⁰ On the other hand, the panellists on the show, included a member of the National Security Advisory board who clarified that there was no evidence to prove any official backing for this blog and urged the news anchor not to present his perception “as the views of an entire country”.²³¹ On August 30, 2009, television news commented on “China’s hardening of posture and aggressiveness” while reporting an incident of Chinese choppers violating Indian air space in Chumur in Ladakh.²³²

Ten days later, TIMES NOW ran an “exclusive” headlined “China’s incursions lie exposed” where the Ladakh councillor came on record accusing China of land grabbing on the disputed border.²³³ This incident came four days after pictures of rocks painted in Cantonese bearing the inscription ‘China’ surfaced on India’s side of the border, allegedly the work of Chinese soldiers.²³⁴ As China denied reports of the incursion, the Indian foreign minister down played the incident blaming it “on different perceptions of the two sides on the line of actual control” and maintained that the “Sino-Indian border was the most peaceful in the region.”²³⁵ The media did not let this pass.

On September,8, 2009, questions on the News Hour debate read, “Is China testing our patience? Is India too cagey vis-à-vis China? By appearing unprovoked are we doing the right thing?” Strategic affairs experts on the show, were in agreement, that an aggressive stance was

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² TIMES NOW, August 30, 2009, “China crosses the line” accessed as “China choppers violate Indian airspace” on URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=edfCfGSpG2A&feature=channel> on August 30, 2010.

²³³ TIMES NOW, September 7, 2009, “China’s incursion lie exposed” accessed as “China’s incursion in India proved” accessed on URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTihru9Enmo> on August 30, 2010.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ TIMES NOW, September 7, 2009, “India down plays China’s land grab in Ladakh”, accessed on URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1C6IqhClHhM> on August 30, 2010.

the need of the hour and spoke at length of the option of a possible military build up as a suitable response.²³⁶ The next few days saw rumours floating of a possible military build up on the Chinese border.²³⁷ General (Retd.) Deepankar Banerjee, director of a New Delhi based think tank, recalls that, “the then Army Chief, was forced to come out with a statement due to the media’s immaturity. The strategic plans for the future, stood exposed due to the incident.”²³⁸

CNN IBN’s debate took the issue one step further. It analysed the question “Why is India soft on China?”, and attributed India’s unwillingness to comment as a product of the asymmetry of power. The show opened with an interactive question asking if viewers thought that “China was India’s greatest threat in the region?”-which had 90 per cent of the viewers responding in the affirmative.²³⁹ Here the media was playing two roles again – first appearing to voice and shape public opinion, second creating an environment for aggressive foreign policy posturing which could be “legitimised” by mass verdict. As if to prove a point, at the end of the show poll results stood at 95 per cent. NDTV 24x7 debated whether “India was downplaying the China Challenge?” questioning India’s “over-reactiveness with Pakistan and under-reaction to China.”²⁴⁰ The then Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Shashi Tharoor, dismissed the question as “media hype” and reiterated that “China-India relations were complex but could not be compared to Pakistan”. Repeating the government’s line on “confusions

²³⁶ TIMES NOW September 8, 2009, “The News hour Debate “Is China testing our patience” accessed as “the debate on Chinese incursion in Indian territory”, URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0yr6qHV7KoI&feature=channel> on August 30, 2010.

²³⁷ “India beefing up China border defences”, September 14, 2009, www.dnaindia.com, accessed on URL: http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report_india-is-beefing-up-china-border-defences_1289978 on August 30, 2010.

²³⁸ Interview with Gen (Retd) Deepankar Banerjee, Director, IPCS, conducted at Safdarjang Enclave, New Delhi on June 29, 2010.

²³⁹ CNN IBN, September 18, 2009, Face The Nation, “China India’s greatest threat?” accessed on URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8On3vYv0kek> on August 30, 2010.

²⁴⁰ NDTV 24x7, The Buck Stops Here, September 16, 2009; “Is India downplaying China Challenge?” accessed on URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15R1d9VDvYM> on August 30, 2010.

of perceptions of line of actual control”, Tharoor said, “Inbuilt bilateral mechanisms would deal with the issues.”²⁴¹ Clearly, the government was not buckling under pressure.

So the question remains - what made the Chinese case study different, considering the media coverage and the attention spent on it were comparable to “Australian race row” or the “Indo-Pak relations post 26/11?” The answer perhaps lies once again in the conditions under which the media is seen to influence policy formulation. First, New Delhi’s cautious policy towards Beijing was clear from the very beginning, so there was little room to set the agenda. This was not the case with Australia, since the establishment was caught off guard. Second, despite the provocative nature of reportage, public sentiment towards China seemed far less incensed compared to the pre-existing sensitivities with regard to Australia and Pakistan. Mahrukh Inayet elaborates:

National sentiment has never been overtly against the Chinese – despite having fought a war with them. Beijing is seen more as an economic rival, rather than an emotional one. Hence, despite extensive reporting of the border disputes – the foreign policy stand vis-à-vis China does not seem to be impacted as much with what the media comments.²⁴²

Dr Baru highlights two other aspects of the media coverage of this difficult relationship. He says there is a:

...certain element of hostility does exist which filters into the coverage, since psychologically Indians can accept the West as ahead of them but will not be happy about China’s superiority over India. This bias also feeds into public opinion. In some instances negative media coverage may help the govt. For e.g. if the govt wants to delay talks with China on a particular issue, it can always cite the

²⁴¹ Shashi Tharoor, then MoS External Affairs; interviewed on NDTV 24x7, The Buck Stops Here, on September 16, 2009, accessed on URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15R1d9VDvYM> on August 30, 2010.

²⁴² Interview with Mahrukh Inayet, Former Senior News Editor, TIMES NOW via e-mail on August 3, 2010.

media as the bearer of public opinion and defer talks under the pretence of domestic pressure.²⁴³

Mini Menon put the blame on “superficial coverage” and argues that:

This has been on for so long that even within the media there is little consensus on what needs to be done around it. Periodically, coverage is done based on stray reports or statements. But there has been no consistent move to address the real on the ground issues.²⁴⁴

Clarity on policy, absence of pre-existing sensitivities and intermittent coverage were the main reasons for the media failing to impact “symbolic agendas” vis-à-vis China.

5.6 Humanitarian Crises and “Media Triggered Action”

Like its Western counterparts, the electronic media in India has had its share of the CNN Effect fallout, especially in case of humanitarian crises that find Indian nationals abroad in trouble. In most of these cases, as the events unfold, the media becomes the primary source of information, since it is technologically more sophisticated than the government sourced channels. Public sentiment is high since it involves Indian citizens and hence media coverage acts as an accelerant, demanding quick decisions from a government that is mostly, caught unaware. The impact is here and now, short term and episodic, where the media triumph is momentary but does not question and influence long term policy with the nation in question.

The first such case to examine would be the now frequent “hostage crises” involving Indian sailors off the coast of Somalia. According to

²⁴³ Interview with Dr Sanjaya Baru, eminent journalist and former media advisor to PM conducted on January 4, 2012 in New Delhi.

²⁴⁴ Interview with Mini Menon, Executive Editor Bloomberg-U'TV, conducted via email on August 30, 2010.

²⁴⁵ “495 Indian sailors held hostage by Somali pirates in the last 4 years: govt”, March 3, 2011, accessed on URL: http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report_495-indian-sailors-held-hostage-by-somali-pirates-in-4-years-government_1515157 January 25, 2012.

government figures of March 2011, 495 Indian sailors had been captured by Somalian pirates over the last four years and 64 sailors still remain to be rescued by the Indian government.²⁴⁵ It is a story that has been media driven through the years. I remember, at TIMES NOW when *MV Stolt Valor* was hijacked in Kenya, with 18 sailors including Captain Prabhat Goyal in 2008, the channel had run a campaign captioned “Bring Back Our Sailors” with emotive pleas from Goyal’s wife, thus building pressure on the government to take action. Statements flew thick and fast and the government had negotiated the ransom behind closed doors. The captain and his crew returned home to a hero’s welcome not just from his family but the national media, and it ended with all channels claiming credit for “impact”.

The pattern unfortunately is now familiar: each time an incident is reported, the media across the channels feverishly “follows up”; stories where faces of the sailors and anguished families are packaged, emotive debates questioning govt inaction are televised. The ministers for external affairs and for overseas Indian affairs are hounded by the media meet the concerned families and assure action, finally after close door ransom negotiations held by govt agencies, most sailors are brought home. The media is satisfied that its campaign prompted action and the follow up ends there. Has this coverage ever questioned and deconstructed sea piracy laws that the government can take up internationally or why government agencies are so helpless in dealing with these crises?—generally not, since it would only dampen the euphoria. The government too has not helped itself, by mostly avoiding questions and tirelessly doling out assurances on TV. At least, in this case, the media ended up helping the families, albeit also pocketing some TRP.

The second case in point, would be the evacuation of 18,000 Indian citizens from war torn Libya in February 2011.²⁴⁶ All three of the channels being analysed in this monograph had flown in their correspondents to Libya to cover the uprisings against the 41 years of dictatorial rule by Muammar Gaddafi. The war was brought in live to

²⁴⁶ “18,000 Indians stranded in Libya, MEA promises Action” February 22, 2011, www.timesnow.tv, accessed on URL: <http://www.timesnow.tv/articleshow/4365981.cms> on January 12, 2012.

our drawing rooms by correspondents covering the NATO intervention that killed him and most of his top leadership. In this crisis again, the media's role was that of an accelerant, since it had the advantage of beaming live from ground zero, and an edge over government officials in terms of sourcing facts and figures and updating information almost minute to minute.²⁴⁷ It also helped in conveying messages from Indians stranded in Libya who would either contact the journalists on the ground or through channel platforms on social networks like Facebook and Twitter. The MEA counsel helpline line numbers were flashed round the clock on tickers of all news screens, enabling families, both in India and abroad, to get in touch with the concerned authorities. Therefore, it would not be off the mark, to argue that live television reporting from ground zero, made the evacuation of Indian citizens a priority for the top ranking ministry officials, and provided them with first hand information; even acted as a communication bridge between government officials and families, thereby prompting action.

It was interesting to see, the then Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao, LIVE on an NDTV 24x7 show "Your Call", taking questions from both family members and Indian nationals stranded abroad about the pace of evacuation and guiding them to contact the right people.²⁴⁸ Such a high level interaction would not have been possible without television. However, was there a follow up story on what happened to the Indians who had left their livelihood and returned to India? What are they doing now? Perhaps a few sketchy reports here and there, and the episode has been forgotten.

²⁴⁷ "Air lifted from Libya", TIMES NOW in Libya"; March 3, 2011, accessed on URL: <http://www.timesnow.tv/TIMES-NOW-at-Libya-evacuation/videshow/4366475.cms>; "Fleeing Libya: Indian's caught in Crossfire", The Buck Stops Here, NDTV 24x7; February 22, 2011 accessed on URL: <http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/the-buck-stops-here/libya-war-zone-evacuating-indians/191811>; "Ground Zero in Tripoli: Gaddafi's Den" CNN IBN speaks to people fleeing Libya; March 7, 2011, accessed on URL : <http://ibnlive.in.com/videos/145162/cnnibn-speaks-to-people-trying-to-flee-libya.html> on January 29, 2012.

²⁴⁸ "Libyan evacuation not slow at all: Nirupama Rao", on the show "Your Call", NDTV 24x7, February 4, 2011, accessed on URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xE_2h5L4bB8 on January 29, 2012.

The third case to explore would not perhaps qualify as a humanitarian crisis by definition. It involved Indian students who found themselves in the centre of an immigration scam, enrolled in a sham university called Tri-Valley in the United States, who were threatened with legal action and deportation in February 2011.²⁴⁹ Media coverage of this event peaked when students sent images of themselves being radio-tagged to news networks and gave ‘live’ phone-interviews of their situation sparking a wave of sympathetic media coverage.²⁵⁰ The TIMES NOW debate at 9 pm, had headlines that screamed “Duped, tagged and helpless: Students Recount Tri-Valley Horror; Have we abandoned our own?”, the scroll bands running on the bottom of the screen said “America justifies action as procedure”. The screen also showed Facebook and Twitter feedback from angry Indians asking the government to take action, while the panellists included some family members of the victims, who were encouraged to confront a guest representing the US establishment with questions like “Do you need to humiliate my brother like this? Do you think he will develop wings and fly away?”²⁵¹

This emotional coverage touched a chord with many Indians who had relatives in the US studying in similar universities. Similar headlines followed on CNN IBN “Insult after heartbreak: Students Treated Like Animals”, claimed a report which had the Minister of Overseas Affairs, Vayalar Ravi, assuaging the media by saying: “the matter would be taken up immediately since Indians had done nothing wrong.”²⁵² Now this was a full blown diplomatic row.

²⁴⁹ “Duped Tri Valley University Students Ignored Red Flag”, February 2, 2011, Hindustan Times, accessed on URL: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/Americas/Duped-Tri-Valley-University-students-ignored-red-flags/Article1-657488.aspx>, on January 29, 2012.

²⁵⁰ “We are being treated like criminals: Students speak to TIMES NOW”; January 29, 2011, accessed on URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8lsj1SRh-70&feature=related> on January 30, 2012.

²⁵¹ “Duped Tagged and Helpless: Tri-Valley Students claim they are being treated like animals”, The Newshour 9pm on TIMES NOW, February 1, 2011, accessed on URL : <http://www.timesnow.tv/Debate-Duped-tagged-helpless-1/videoshow/4364192.cms> on January 30, 2012.

²⁵² “Indian students plight: Tagged like animals” CNN IBN, February 4, 2011, accessed on URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hgw5rVGOjIk> on January 30, 2012.

Consider the following excerpt of a conversation between Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao and a TIMES NOW journalist, right in the middle of the incident.²⁵³

TIMES NOW: You are going to the US. Regarding Tri Valley, there are so many students who are again suffering, lot of students are still having radio tags on them.

Foreign Secretary: Eighteen students.

TIMES NOW: Yes. What are you going to do about that?

Foreign Secretary: Are you asking me whether I am going there to free those students?

TIMES NOW: Are you really going to do anything to help those students? Are you going to take it up?

Foreign Secretary: Obviously I will discuss this issue with the State Department. [...] This is not a single-issue relationship, I am sure you understand that. We have a very important strategic and global partnership with the United States. We have had a very successful visit of President Obama to India. We want to build on those understandings. We have a very large Indian community in the United States that is doing extremely well, that has brought pride and glory to India. So, we must celebrate these affirmatives in the relationship also.

What comes through, is the frustration of the Foreign Secretary, who is trying to convey that her ministry is trying to balance various aspects of the Indo-US relationship while assuaging domestic concerns. She goes on to say:

Radio-tagging as far as we are concerned, there is a cultural disconnect. It seems very alien, very foreign to us when somebody is walking round with that monitor on their ankles. So, I wish that had not happened. But the US authorities tell us that this is something that they do, they have been doing it in other cases also. That is where the matter rests. There is an investigation going on and

²⁵³ Indian Foreign Secretary's Interview to TIMES NOW, February 8, 2011, excerpt accessed from <http://www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=530417152> on January 30, 2012.

obviously we cannot seek to interfere in that process, please understand that. I will not be able to wave a magic wand when I go to Washington and see that the whole investigation is tied up and everything is set at rest. That is not going to happen, let us be realistic, let us be pragmatic.

But I will represent to the US Government that we are concerned that this has happened, and there are many youngsters – I am not just talking of the 18 who are radio-tagged, there are over a thousand young people – whose lives have been affected by that. What about their future? Where can they be adjusted? Will they get admitted to other legitimate universities since they went with correct documentation? They were not illegal immigrants. That should be understood. They went with all the right visas and documents. So, our expectation and our effort will be to convey and to impress upon the US authorities that something should be done to help these students who are basically innocent.²⁵⁴

Needless to say, media channels relentlessly followed up the Foreign Secretary and Foreign Minister SM Krishna's visit to the US, and after the students were released the media was satisfied.²⁵⁵ Here the media lived up to the pattern drawn by Livingston and others, where it acted as a “policy agenda setter- prioritising the case for decision makers, then shortening the time frame for decision making and accelerated reaction and resolution of the issue”, and also acted as an “impediment” in the broader aspect of policy relations between India and the US, with the pressure it put the government under for confrontation.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ For more see Press Release of Indian embassy on February 13, 2011, accessed on URL: <http://www.indianembassy.org/prdetail1680/press-release-on-further-steps-regarding-indian-students-at-tri-valley-university> on January 30, 2012.

²⁵⁶ “Clarifying the CNN Effect: An Examination of Media Effects According To Type of Military Intervention”, Livingston, S., June (1997), Research Paper -18, Monograph published by Harvard University.

Ambassador Ponappa elaborates that media impact in humanitarian situations involving Indian nationals abroad is always greater because we are living in times where:

When events unfold in far away areas, we have department and desk officers preparing background reports. But before these reports are prepared we already have to react to TV cameras who already are armed with information. So our staff now has the added task of keeping up with news organisations, to speed up assessments and even defend their reports if they are contrary to evidence presented by real time media. This has hastened the decision making process, which is not always good for long term policy.²⁵⁷

Devesh Kapur, in fact has proven, that “the inter-linkages between the well being of the diaspora and public opinion in India are likely to pose greater challenges for India’s foreign policy in the future.”²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ Interview with Ambassador Leela Ponappa (IFS) and Former Dy National Security Advisor on January 18, 2012, in New Delhi.

²⁵⁸ Kapur, D, “Public Opinion and Indian Foreign Policy”, *India Review*, vol 8, no 3, July-September 2009, p. 300, pp. (286-305).

VI CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMENDATIONS

“We have aggressive, competitive, young media people today, and foreign affairs are no longer the preserve of diplomats and senior editors. The best media beat today is foreign affairs.”²⁵⁹

Ambassador Navtej Sarna - Former Spokesperson, MEA

Sarna’s reflection is perhaps an acknowledgement of the growing awareness and importance of the media in India’s policy environment. Shivshankar Menon accepts that “Foreign ministries have been sensitive to the media. The hijacking of IC 814 at Kandahar (1999) was one of the first news stories to be televised live and the impact was there for all to see.”²⁶⁰ Yet, he cautions, that the current “breaking news model” of 24-hour English news networks lends itself to the game of highest TRPs; sacrificing accuracy and credibility in the bargain.²⁶¹ The other experts quoted in this paper have seconded this opinion.

While some maintain that the “media today is integral to policy formulation”; others describe news coverage as largely immature, “with sudden explosion without expertise, which detracts from its influence.”²⁶² Most fault the media for being an “echo chamber for various sections within the policy establishment” and not “investing in “competent policy analysis.”²⁶³

²⁵⁹ Ambassador Navtej Sarna’s talk to students at Indian School of Business, Hyderabad on “Media and its role in Diplomacy.” On April 30, 2009, accessed on URL: <http://www.isb.edu/media/UsrSiteNewsMgmt.aspx?topicid=533>, on August 30, 2010.

²⁶⁰ Interview with NSA and Former Foreign Secretary, Shivshankar Menon, conducted on July 8, 2010, at Ministry of Defence, South block, New Delhi.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Interview with Gen (Retd) Deepankar Banerjee, Director, IPCS, New Delhi on June 29, 2010 and Interview with Professor DK Thussu, Director, Indian Media Centre, University of Westminster via e-mail on August 4, 2010.

²⁶³ Interview with Sukumar Muralidharan, Former Deputy Editor, Frontline (The Hindu) via email on September 9, 2010.

The television journalists defend their turf but are realistic about their achievements. Mahrukh Inayet, notes that, while the news medium has made the Indian politician more accountable and the public more aware, the impacts of the campaigns picked up are more diffused and limited.²⁶⁴ Suhasini Haidar, re-emphasises that “television has factored ‘real time response’ changing the complexion of day to day diplomatic negotiations, but the long term policy impact has been negligible. Most often media is used as the excuse to not move ahead on policies, citing it as the yardstick of public opinion.”²⁶⁵ Having been part of numerous edit meets that decide on ‘angles and agendas’ of stories one understands that the episodic character of TV news is its ‘*Achilles’ heel*’, which makes it less conducive to the lengthy process of foreign policy formulation. Yet the case studies discussed in the monograph have shown evidence of media influence even if it is “symbolic”.

The three main questions this study set out to examine have been analysed. First, this study has suggested that the Indian media has affected foreign policy formulation in a minimalistic and often symbolic manner. It has been argued that the perceived image of the media as lacking political maturity has taken away from any influence on long term policy changes.

Second, it has elaborated the media’s versatile agency in the discussed crises. The media enunciated its role as an “opinion maker” claiming to speak for the public. It used this position to act as a “pressure group” prodding the direction of negotiations in Indo-Pak talks in the immediate aftermath of the Mumbai attacks while simultaneously acting as a “track II diplomacy agent” for back channel negotiations. During the Indo-US nuclear deal, it mainly acted as a feedback mechanism for policy decisions and an opinion shaper largely in favour of the deal. In the case of the ‘Race Row with Australia’, it was an aggressive “participant” in negotiations – the main source of information, creator of public opinion and a platform for policy discussions.

²⁶⁴ Interview conducted with Mahrukh Inayet, Former Senior News Editor, TIMES NOW via e-mail on August 3, 2010.

²⁶⁵ Interview conducted with Suhasini Haidar, Senior Editor, CNN IBN on July 6, 2010, in New Delhi.

Finally, in the case of the 'Border dispute with China', it played the role of "critical observer" questioning the government's every move, and pushing "aggressive posturing of stance" even if the impact was limited. However, in cases where media coverage involved a humanitarian crisis abroad, it was observed that television coverage acted as an "accelerant", pushing policy and decision making in the short term. In all the three cases examined, media influence was contingent upon specific conditions. The crises were "new events", and coverage was "sustained", "unambiguous" and "negative" thereby speeding up decision making.

It was seen that media exerted more influence where the government lacked policy clarity and pre-existing sensitivities to issues were at play. This was true also for Indo-Pak relations right after 26/11 and the 'Race Row with Australia' where authorities were caught off guard by events and public opinion was already sensitised due to prior interactions. This did not hold true in the Chinese case study, as the Indian government had a clear policy line and public sentiment was not incensed. Similar was the case with the Indo-US nuclear deal, where policy line was clear and media only played the role of a "feedback mechanism."

In all cases, the role and influence of the media on policy formulation, was short term, episodic and symbolic; with very little impact on long term policy formulation. However, this study heavily borrowing from expert analysis, believes that the process of media and foreign policy interaction could be a far more constructive one; and makes the following suggestions:

- The **government has to formulate an information policy** that establishes a systematic process of de-classification and access to information. This will help in correcting any speculation that arises due to the lack of transparency and help journalists and government officials both do their jobs better.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁶ Interview with BG Verghese, veteran journalist conducted on January 13, 2012 in New Delhi.

- **The government should put some thought into reviving Public Service Broadcasting** and bring it up to the quality of a BBC. This could be a platform where news coverage will not be held hostage to following the vicious cycle of TRPs and advertising revenues, thereby allowing in-depth analysis, defying breaking news models and setting sound standards for policy reportage.²⁶⁷
- In the age of television, online and new media, **government officials must have greater interaction with journalists instead of relying on secrecy** and be able to handle the so-called “monster” better. The need of the hour is detailed daily background briefings on the work agendas followed by ministry, ensuring that the public is correctly informed. Articulate and media savvy professionals explaining government stands on crises would help combat the invisible veil of secrecy.²⁶⁸
- The media, especially the **electronic medium in India, has to go back to the basics and understand that as a medium of the masses it has the great responsibility** of sensible reportage. It has to invest in capacity building exercises, to ensure that its correspondents covering important beats, research a story well and put out accurate information instead of endless speculation. This will only add credibility to the medium.
- **Channels need to invest in “in-house” experts** and research analysts who provide independent unbiased opinions, instead of holding panel discussions where the retired elite find a way to stay relevant in the policy discourse, thus quashing any new ideas that may come to the fore.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Ambassador KC Singh suggests that the PM's stand on Sharm-el-Sheikh fiasco could have been explained better if there wasn't such a shroud of secrecy.

- Finally, networks need **to invest in posting correspondents across the globe, if they want quality field reports that will ensure an original analysis** of foreign policy issues and filter into the information feedback mechanism of policymakers, which in turn could actually influence policy.

In conclusion one must remember that “the making of foreign policy is a marathon and not a sprint, and news coverage is just one of the factors affecting it.”²⁶⁹

²⁶⁹ Seib, P. (1997), p. 139.

VII

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This monograph has tried to demonstrate the dynamics of the growing interface between diplomacy and the news media within the Indian context. The focus has been broadcast media, specifically television and the change it has ushered in bureaucratic and political responses to crises. TV news coverage in India seems to have a higher impact in the realm of domestic policy vis-à-vis foreign policy. Its exponential growth in a competitive ratings driven market has given it the image of a pressure group that has not yet attained the political maturity to be taken seriously by policymakers. However the “real time response” and accountability component introduced into the arena of diplomacy has proved to be a vital pressure point in many foreign policy considerations.

Recent foreign policy crises episodes - The immediate fall out on Indo-Pak relations post the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks; the Indo-US Nuclear Deal (2005-2008); the border relations with China after incursion reports, and the 'race row attacks' in Australia in 2009 are studied in detail. The media's agency has been versatile in the case studies examined: pressure group, track II platform, international political broker, critical observer and feedback mechanism.

Unpacking this “perceived influence” of the media specifically in the area of foreign policy and its multifaceted agency in the Indian context is the dominant theme of this monograph which examines three basic issues: Does the Indian media influence and shape the policy agendas? If it does, then what is the role and extent of this influence? Is the influence independent or contingent upon conditions?



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