



CMS Media Lab
Monitoring Trends & Empowering Media

COVERAGE OF 2014 LOK SABHA POLLS BY NEWS CHANNELS

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**An analysis by
CMS Media Lab**

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Preface

CMS Media Lab's analysis of coverage of NEWS channels of election campaign in March, April and May received widespread attention as it reported how the campaign was going on in a polarized and personalized way. There has since been an overwhelming demand for more information on the scope and pattern of coverage of elections by NEWS media. That is the motivation for this monograph.

CMS analysis of poll campaign over the years has indicated that the nature of coverage has become a prime mover of poll politics. This monograph is confined to select national NEWS channels, which have been existing since more than a decade. We also realize that coverage by regional channels of poll campaign deserves special attention because of initiatives taken by them. Next time we also hope to focus on regional channels and go beyond the "prime time" coverage of channels.

We welcome any suggestions so that we could make the exercise more reliable, relevant and insightful to help develop corrective action initiatives for NEWS media and other stakeholders involved in our poll process. We believe that free & fair elections and the freedom of press are two sides of the same coin of democracy. And only by way of effective NEWS media coverage of a poll process can we hope to sustain the fundamentals of our parliamentary democracy.

PN Vasanti
Director General, CMS

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Introduction

A unique feature of our parliamentary democracy is its free media sustaining the very process, as in the case of periodic elections, nationally for Lok Sabha and state wise for Assemblies. NEWS media, in turn, flourishes from electoral politics. An important indicator of how free and fair our elections are could be seen from the way NEWS media facilitates the electoral process with its coverage.

The 16th general (Lok Sabha) elections 2014, could easily be considered a 'wonder of the world', not just for the size, but also for the smoothness with which the 100-day spectacle was held. Since the 2004 elections, NEWS channels, often referred to as the hallmark of poll campaigns, have doubled in numbers and their coverage of elections has become professional and competitive to the extent of determining the process and even in making the very outcome obvious. Hence, the need to look into the trends in NEWS channels covering the poll processes has become critical.

CMS has been tracking a couple of prominent NEWS channels for nearly a decade and analyzing their contents. After round the clock monitoring of broadcasts for a couple of years, it was concluded that prime time coverage (7 to 11 PM) is sufficient to reflect the priorities of the day in view of unique nature of NEWS channels, repeat and replay coverage, including the visual footage as often during the day.

To bring out the nature of coverage of 2014 Lok Sabha election, CMS analysed the periodic reports of its Media Lab. Five news channels (two English and three Hindi), namely NDTV, 24x7 Aajtak, ABP NEWS, Zee NEWS and CNN IBN, were tracked to reflect the scope of coverage of NEWS media in general and of NEWS channels in particular. This monograph presents highlights of this analysis.

An Overview

NEWS media coverage of 2014 poll was unprecedented. Never before has NEWS media coverage of poll campaign been so polarised, (or should we say one directional), to the extent of pre determining the poll outcome. What started as AAP's Arvind Kejriwal centric media coverage (at the announcement of the poll schedule), became Modi driven too soon and remained that way till the poll campaign ended.

Although the fight at the national level was between the incumbent Congress party led UPA and the BJP, the media coverage of Congress party was not even thirty percent at any point of the campaign. Even the coverage of Rahul Gandhi by NEWS channels was only about ten percent of the prime time given to Modi. It was interesting how Kejriwal's campaign was relegated to a third position as the poll schedule advanced, phase after phase.

Then again, the 2014 the Lok Sabha poll campaign was no different from the earlier times in terms of issues covered and personality focus of coverage. This is despite the fact that the number of NEWS channels has more than doubled since the 2004 Lok Sabha poll and even when the usage of social media and new technologies was on a grand scale. It remains to be seen what difference the

Media coverage of candidate's background

In 2014, NEWS media reported more about candidates' profile than ever before, and in time, so that voters could decide on the right candidate. ADR has made it possible for NEWS media to report and thereby enable voters to select the right candidate. NEWS media was quick in analysing candidates' profiles after nominations, but did not show the same swiftness in reporting cash lures, and other controversies.

2014 election was the second national election after it became obligatory for candidates to declare their criminal antecedents and all about their assets and education (CMS was one of the agencies, along with ADR, to insist on such declaration, by reaching out to the President of India and the courts). Has such information in public purview made any difference towards getting better individuals fight the poll and also win the election?

The point that perhaps need to be looked into is why NEWS media reports are not convincing or motivating voters to select better individuals as their representatives. This could be because there was not enough coverage or seriousness in the pattern of reporting. NEWS media, particularly NEWS channels, need to give this information on profile of candidates as much prominence as they give to controversies. No examples were noticed as to when NEWS media had taken special interest to convey this information promptly and repeatedly.

boom in channels and new media has made in enriching voters.

Interestingly, despite nationwide skepticism about poll eve surveys and the Election Commissions restrictions, NEWS channels took to poll surveys in 2014 as if there would never be another opportunity! It remains an interesting curio that there was hardly any difference in the projections of these surveys (but they wished to reiterate such an outcome). Against one or two surveys in the earlier polls, some national NEWS channels had four or more pre poll surveys, even though the start of polling schedule means they should refrain from these activities.

This analysis indicates a shift from party to candidates in the focus of elections despite India having a party-based parliamentary democracy. Even the poll expenditure of candidates is much more than by parties, contrary to what was the case a decade ago. This is perhaps because, for NEWS media, personalized coverage provides an opportunity for a more dynamic coverage with human interest.

Punditry view of a set of mostly Delhi based “experts” sitting around in a studio and deliberating

Channels going for Poll surveys

Never before have so many pre poll and exit polls been conducted by NEWS channels, as in 2014. Again, unlike ever before, some channels presented more than two pre poll surveys within a span of two weeks. Also, most of these surveys had similar projections as to the direction of poll outcome. This was despite the increased questioning that such poll surveys had come under. National channels, as well as regional channels, irrespective of their language, had conducted poll surveys in 2014. Each such survey was promoted by channels and presented ranging anywhere between 30 minutes to two hours. Thus, poll surveys were prominently covered by all channels.

The question that obviously arises is what difference have they made? While one could attribute poll outcome to poll surveys, one cannot be sure as to what way surveys improved the poll process qualitatively. The punditry nature of channels (and their experts) was unleashed by way of studio discussions and some even taking to the field to put forward the survey findings to a larger public (for endorsements!).

The question here is, with so much resources (by channels themselves or someone else bearing the expenditure), and so much broadcast time for their coverage, what impact or implications could be attributed. Can poll surveys of channels be credited for voter turnout, or for a single party emerging victorious, or for creating a “Modi wave”?

Then of course, are the questions about transparency of surveys, their methodologies and about the identity of the agency, which conducted the field work. Paid NEWS in the context of elections has been talked about for quite some time. But no one has talked about “paid surveys” of channels!

campaign trends continued to be more relied by channels for a show off of their coverage of election “in an influencing way”, while field-based “open house” approach is adopted more by regional channels. By the next round of the polls, hopefully there would be an even better grass roots reality. “Election Express” idea of a live studio-fitted vehicle going across the country was an innovative idea well tried out in 2014 by Headlines Today.

Then of course, some channels tried to come up with debates between parties and even between candidates (though with no follow up) so that issues and concerns acquire attention. Overall, the channels had many more types of featured programmes, apart from reflecting all that in their NEWS bulletins.

Some examples for proliferation of programmes on 2014 polls by NEWS channels



Raj Tilak, Panchayat, Election U La La, Election Express Chunavi Baat, Third Degree, Andolan, Satyagrah Political Stock Exchange, Shweta Patra, So Sorry



Road To 2014, The Battleground, The Final Word, Truth Vs Hype



A Billion Votes, India Decides, vote India Vote, Kings & Queens, Campaign Trail, Follow the Leader, The Election Tracker, The Election That is Not, Open Mike

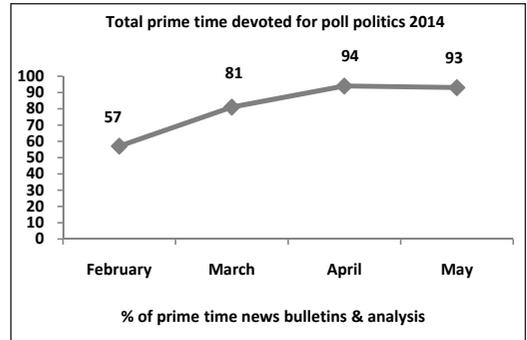


India 2014 – Live Report India 2014 – Politics, India 2014-Politics Central, India 2014- Blueprint, NEWS Deck, The Flip, Political Juice, Access, India’s Watershed Elections, REAL POLITIK, SHOWDOWN, YOUR VOICE & YOUR VOTE, POLITICS NOW

Analysis of primetime coverage

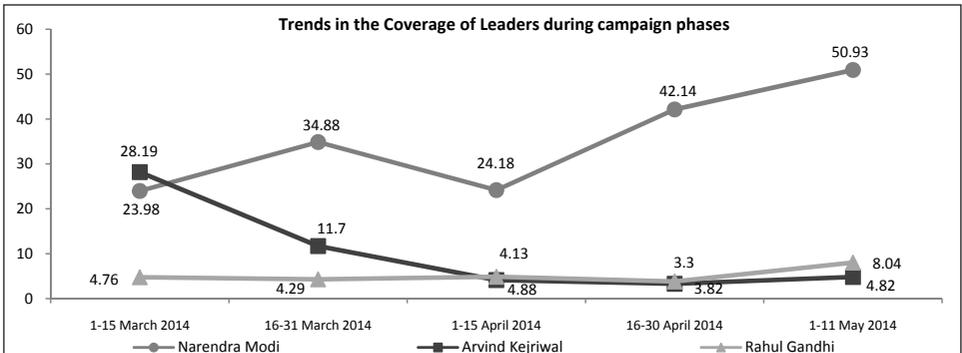
General elections are truly a festival time for NEWS channels. Covering them is an opportunity to rejuvenate and reposition themselves in a competitive context. Closer to announcement of poll schedule, national NEWS channels devoted around fifty percent of their prime time for politics (including the impending polls), which once the campaign gained momentum, had gone to 94 percent of prime time

The coverage of polls by national channels was looked into from four different time phases of poll schedule, with nine different dates of polling, starting April 7, 2014. Before the final announcement of poll schedule (March 5), the first fortnight of campaign began with revealing the names of candidates for five phases, second fortnight with three phases of polls, third phase, and the last leg of polls (May 1 to 11). This phase-wise analysis of campaign coverage by channels gave insights into the coverage.



Personality Centered Coverage

Coverage of campaigns by channels was personality-centric all through. But the way different leaders received the coverage brought out the emerging poll scene very aptly. For example, Arvind Kejriwal, as a leader of a new party confined to Delhi, received higher percent of prime time, but when the campaign picked up with names of many candidates being made known, he was almost “dropped” by channels. Till then, his coverage was relatively more than even Narendra Modi, who was the only formally declared Prime Ministerial candidate of a major national party.



That NEWS channels respond to public mood is so obvious from this phase-wise analysis of coverage of personalities. But Kejriwal continued to receive higher coverage than the leader of Congress party, Rahul Gandhi, for some weeks.

Rahul Gandhi, leader of incumbent party, received same level of coverage until the last phase of poll schedule (May 1 to 11), where his own election was included. With last minutes pitch, coverage of him was doubled but still far below that of Modi.

What should also interest is that Kejriwal, who confined his own campaign to mostly around Delhi, received much higher coverage than Sonia Gandhi and L K Advani, who campaigned in more than a couple of states. And, also much higher coverage than Mamata Beneraji and Mulayam Singh Yadav.

Coverage of leaders by NEWS channels during prime time 8-10 PM

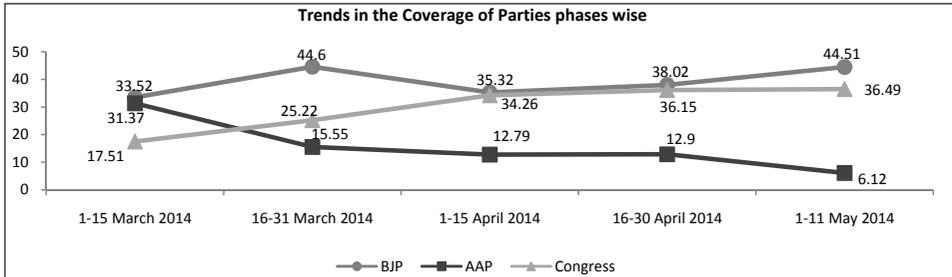
01 March-11 May-2014		
Leaders	Time In Minutes	% of Time
Narendra Modi	3415	36.32
Arvind Kejriwal	879	9.35
Rahul Gandhi	468	4.98
Priyanka Gandhi	289	3.07
Sonia Gandhi	168	1.79
Mulayam Yadav	162	1.72
L K Advani	155	1.65
Amit Shah	153	1.63
Manmohan Singh	148	1.57
Mamta Banerjee	121	1.28

Priyanka Gandhi, whose campaigns were confined to two constituencies in UP, received more than twice the coverage time for Mamata, Mulayam, Amit Shah and even Sonia Gandhi and L K Advani.

The criteria for coverage by channels was apparently much beyond the scope of actual campaign. Potential of creating controversy, too, seemed to matter, and so did leaders' activities and movement during campaign period. The fact that Modi travelled far and wide and had many more public meets seems to have helped gain and sustain higher coverage.

Coverage of political parties

In a parliamentary democracy, the elections are presumed to be party centric and the media converge is also more on party lines.



BJP received high coverage all through the poll phases of 2014 poll. Its coverage increased from around one third of prime time of NEWS channels to around 45 percent in the final phase of campaign.

Even coverage of Congress Party increased, but from less than 20 percent of prime time to about 36 percent in the final phase. AAP, on the other hand, was marginalized to 6 percent in the final phase, although it had over 30 percent coverage in March-April phase.

BJP received a big boost from the very outset of the first phase of March itself (increased from 33 to 44 percent). That spurt in coverage apparently had given the lead to BJP or was it the media that made believe a big lead that BJP had in the field?. Such Media coverage obviously ensures that the party remains ahead

But then the same thing cannot be said that channels assessed Congress party's standing as aptly. Coverage of Congress party had increased from 18 percent in March to 25 percent and 35 percent in April and thereafter, its ground campaign apparently did not show any revival.

Overall, AAP got much higher coverage than SP, BSP, Shiv Sena, TMC and other older parties although, it contested for the first time and had no prior field base or organizational structure as a political party as compared to the other parties.

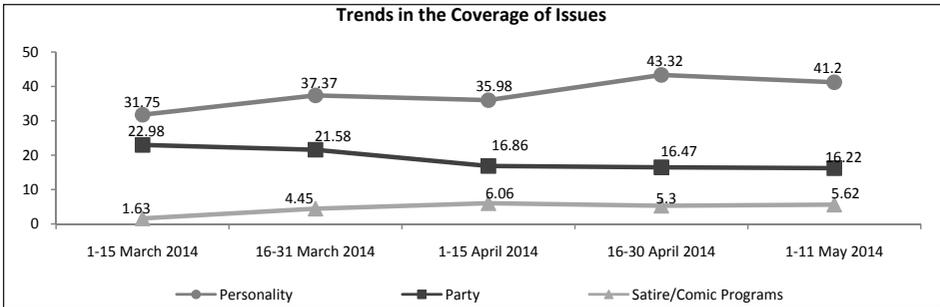
Television NEWS Coverage of political parties - Top 10 Parties

01 Mar-11 May-2014		
Parties	Time In Minutes	% of Time
BJP	1796	38.91
Congress	1338	28.98
AAP	781	16.93
SP	207	4.49
Shiv Sena	72	1.56
BSP	62	1.35
TMC	48	1.05
CPI(M)	46	1.00
MNS	41	0.89
JD (U)	35	0.75

Note: Figures are % of total coverage given to parties in 5 NEWS channels (8-10 pm).

Issues covered as part of poll campaign

Corruption was expected to be a determining issue of 2014 elections of Lok Sabha, well before the poll campaign picked up. But that was not so going by the coverage of poll campaign by national channels. Infact, hardly five percent of primetime broadcasts of channels was to do with corruption.



Interestingly, fictional or comical or satire capsules/ programmes were taken by all channels to reflect the campaign than ever before. Advanced software technology (animation, graphs), it seems, had prompted channels to take to such programmes, to reflect one or the other aspect of the campaign, mostly based around individual leaders. “So sorry”, by Aajtak group, would be remembered for its creative angle. A number of these capsules were repeated several times even within a day.

Personalities and parties were the major focus of the 2014 election coverage in TV NEWS. Both accounted for more than half of (57%) of the primetime election coverage. Election Commission (2.79%) and development (2.23%) got fifth and sixth positions respectively. The seventh spot went to NEWS on Governance (2.12%), followed by public policy (2%), which came eighth.

Coverage on Election Issues

01 Mar-11 May-2014		
Issues	Time in Minutes	% of Time
Personality	9402	38.24
Party	4615	18.77
Satire/Comic/Fictional Programs	1133	4.61
Corruption	872	3.55
Election Commission	686	2.79
Development	548	2.23
Governance	522	2.12
Public Policy	499	2.03
Opinion Polls	488	1.98
Local / Regional Issues	390	1.59

Media Coverage of Lures...!

An interesting element covered by NEWS channels during the 2014 poll campaign was about lures to voters by way of cash and kind. All NEWS channels featured how voters were offered lures in different parts of the country. The way cash was intercepted and confiscated (over Rs. 300 crores), and how polls involved an expenditure of over Rs. 30 000 crores (as estimated by CMS), were all prominently reported by NEWS media across the country.

But what significant difference did all this reporting all make to the poll process? Each time cash was seized somewhere, NEWS channels all over reported it repeatedly bulletin after bulletin. Such reporting created fear and helped in curbing flow of cash, liquor, etc. But it also unwittingly gave ideas elsewhere for innovative methods of disbursing cash.

NEWS media reporting of prominent cash transfer incidents has increased the expectations of voters. Though, initially, candidates lured voters with money, more recently, thanks to NEWS media, some voters started demanding explanations going by what they heard and saw on channels. To add to that phenomena, NEWS media went on to report that many contesting candidates are millionaires and how some of them had multiplied their wealth.

An insight from all this is that such reporting cannot be ignored as it prompted the phenomena instead of snubbing. There is need to find ways of reporting in such a way that accepting money in a quid pro implies high risk and encourages civil society to take initiatives to curb the phenomena. Can we expect to see a change in the structure and appeal of reporting such practices?.

Trends in the coverage of issues did not change in terms of priorities, as personalities dominated TV NEWS since the beginning of the election campaign. The coverage of parties decreased in the second quarter of March, and dipped further in April and remained stagnant towards the end. Satire and humorous content received more time than any individual issue. The most disappointing finding of the study, was that the editorial priorities of NEWS channels hardly featured any of the important issues like governance, development or corruption, or their coverage was meagre.

Need systemic studies

Based on insights from its earlier studies, CMS considered it a fallacy to think that media coverage, favorable of course, helps determine the outcome of an election. Of course, this was more from the perspective of an incumbent party. For that to be true, no incumbent party should ever lose a poll. There were more examples otherwise of incumbents losing the poll, including the 2014 one. Mayawati won the 2003 assembly election without once visiting a NEWS channel studio and without going after media coverage. This 2014 campaign indicates that view perhaps is not a fallacy. One explanation for this could be that unique way Modi went about using several media including the NEWS media in tandem and in a phased and in a saturated way. This is something that needs to be studied with enlarged scope.

The 2014 Lok Sabha poll witnessed an un-precedented anti corruption campaign all over the country and the NEWS media hyped the coverage, with every party reiterating that as an issue of concern. But once the poll campaign picked up, this issue was not reported as a poll issue. This analysis of CMS media lab tracking indicates that corruption received hardly five percent of prime time coverage during the highlight of the campaign. What difference has NEWS media coverage of corruption made? Do we have any evidence? Only a more systematic study could confirm.

Sometimes, we see preemptive reporting in the coverage of poll time campaigns. Earlier, CMS noted based on its studies, that one reason for relatively lower voter turnout, was this preemptive nature of reporting in NEWS media. That is, channels present its poll surveys and studio based “expert discussions” in such a way that the outcome is already evident when infact the polling day is weeks away. Thus, instead of motivating voter for active participation in the poll process, the structure of coverage gives the impression that it will not make a difference. Another example is the way bundles of notes confiscated are repeatedly shown by channels, thus putting off voters.

In their coverage of polls, channels are more interested in promoting themselves than making a difference in the very poll process. For that, some NEWS channels in 2014 had a dozen different variety of programmes to do with elections. But the focus is more on studio based panel discussions during the prime time.



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