

Crisis Coverage or Conflict Creation? Analysing Conversational Violence and Politics of Blame in Indian News Channel Discussions

P-ISSN: 3048-9334 | E-ISSN: 3048-9342
SJCC International Journal of
Communication Research
Vol: 1 | Issue: 1 | Sep. 2024
pp. 9-25 | © The Author (s) 2024
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Abstract

Traditionally, news is perceived as the objective reporting of events. However, the advent of 24-hour news channels introduced primetime news discussions, which dedicate space to subjective interpretations. A notable feature of these discussions is the prevalence of conversational violence, alongside the personal biases introduced by the special interests of the institutions represented by each participant. Conversational violence, characterised by anger, raised voices, accusations, and shaming, frequently arises from the challenge to these vested interests. This study examines the occurrence of conversational violence in Indian news media during a national crisis – the Pulwama terrorist attack of 2019. The study analyses nineteen hours of primetime news discussions concerning the attack, broadcasted by four top-rated Indian English news channels. The content analysis of the transcripts reveals that, despite the gravity of the national crisis, the discussions were markedly characterised by conversational violence. Participants employed two main types of conversational violence: allegations of insincerity and accusations of incompetence. Rather than focusing on crisis management, the discussions predominantly veered towards political blame and hate speech.

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Keywords

Indian news channels, news discussion, politics of blame, primetime news, conversational violence, Pulwama attack, national crisis

Introduction

With the advent of 24/7 television news channels, the news industry sought innovative methods of news presentation to maintain viewer engagement. Among these innovations were news debates, which introduced a new format aimed at captivating audiences. This shift marked a significant transformation in news media, as the traditional, objective reporting of current events gave way to more subjective and interpretative news discussions.

Initially, these debates aimed to provide a comprehensive outlook on incidents or policies by featuring experts from various relevant fields. This format enabled viewers to understand different perspectives on the top issues of the day. Over time, these discussions became some of the highest-rated programs on news channels, leading to their increased dramatisation and the elevation of TV anchors to celebrity status. Multi-screen discussions during prime hours became a staple of news programming as channels endeavored to attract and retain viewers amid intense ratings competition.

In India, the emergence of 'star anchors' like Rajdeep Sardesai at CNN IBN and Arnab Goswami at Times Now marked the beginning of a new era. Their styles, particularly Goswami's confrontational "in the name of the nation" approach, transformed news debates into high-decibel spectacles. This style was subsequently adopted by other channels. Additionally, the rise of female anchors such as Barkha Dutt as debate moderators further diversified the landscape of news discussions (Ohm, 2014).

Asking difficult questions, demanding clear answers, and publicly expressing anger have become defining characteristics of news programs. These elements have increasingly competed with reality shows broadcasted during the same prime-time slots on entertainment channels (Parameswaran, 2012). In Indian news channels, shouting, accusations, mocking, and shaming during debates thus have become a prevalent mode of communication (Mishra, 2018).

Conversational Violence in News Media

Thussu (2007) observed that as competition within the news media sector increased, the style of presenting news began to overshadow its substance. Jones (2005) further argues that talk shows on political affairs should not merely be viewed as a form of entertainment; rather, they represent a novel way in which people conceptualise and discuss politics in their everyday lives. These observations provide a foundational context for understanding conversational violence in news media discussions.

Conversational violence in news media is often characterised by the use of loud and aggressive language aimed at other panellists to assert one's point during prime-time news broadcasts. This type of violence, which Luginbuhl (2007) refers to as 'violence through language,' involves mutual accusations of incompetence and insincerity. This study examines how conversational violence is employed as a rhetorical strategy to express dissent, protest, and moral indignation within the contemporary news media landscape. Mishra (2018) suggests that such loud debates are strategically employed to capture audience attention and underscore the seriousness of the issues being discussed.

Luttich (2007) describes the typical procedure of news channel discussions as follows: the news anchor poses a provocative question on a particular topic, which is then addressed by panellists with opposing viewpoints who engage in vigorous debate to assert their perspectives. As the argument intensifies, the anchor introduces an entirely different speaker to offer a fresh opinion. The discussion is then returned to the original panellists, culminating in the anchor's final judgement on the topic. Additionally, studies of talk shows indicate that moderators often conclude the show by reiterating the prevailing popular view rather than accommodating a range of perspectives (Khorana, 2017).

Luginbuhl (2007) explains that the strategy employed in news channel debates involves defending oneself not through rational arguments but by emotionally undermining the opponent, revisiting past grievances, targeting the opponent's weaknesses, and using metaphoric language for rebuttal. This includes interrupting the opponent, raising one's voice, and preventing them from completing their arguments. Politicians, in these discussions, often seek not to develop opinions but to promote their own perspectives. They employ various tactics to prevent their opponents from achieving a positive self-representation, which aligns

with the news organisations' interest in generating conflict. Luginbuhl summarises these debates by noting that "arguments presented are secondary; the main issue is the fight... they are staged for the audience... the exertion of conversational violence is part of it" (2007).

Research on the non-verbal behaviour of panellists suggests that they use gestures and body language to dominate their opponents in multi-window news debates (Seiter et al., 1998). As Luttich (2007) indicates, news channel debates are framed as contests rather than rational discussions aimed at resolving issues.

Adjanira (2006) characterises debates on Indian news channels as a gladiatorial exercise, marked by yelling and mutual contempt, which ultimately degrades the topic under discussion. Luginbuhl describes this phenomenon as 'confrontainment' (2007), with conversational violence being a strategy of dominance, defamation, and self-enhancement, including attacks on opponents' integrity.

Further research indicates that expressions of anger and loud voices are more prevalent when the news content is perceived as identity-threatening rather than a routine news item. Participants in such discussions exhibit heightened anger when they perceive bias against them and when they believe that news organisations or other participants are swaying public opinion against them. The intensity of anger correlates with the degree of perceived bias and the potential harm that the news content could cause (Arpan & Nabi, 2011). Additionally, cognitive studies suggest that for emotions to be evoked, the message must be personally relevant (Nabi, 1999).

Conversely, some studies suggest that media programmes, including news debates, are not reflections of real-life events but are instead staged and scripted (Lunt, 2004; Escoffery, 2006). This perspective appears to contradict the findings of Arpan and Nabi, who argue that anger and noise in broadcast media are provoked by perceived biases and when the news content is directly related to an individual's identity. In contrast, Lunt and Escoffery contend that news realities are orchestrated and scripted. Therefore, the role of the news anchor becomes crucial in determining whether and to what extent channel debates are scripted.

News channels have strategically placed debate segments in prime time to compete with reality shows aired simultaneously on entertainment channels. Indian news media, in particular, presents these debates in a manner designed to be camera-friendly, where opinions, shouting, interruptions, shaming, and embarrassment are orchestrated to create a dramatic effect (Mishra, 2018).

Furthermore, existing research on anger in entertainment media can be compared with its portrayal in news media. There is a noted trend in news media to integrate elements of fictional storytelling into news stories and discussions (Rai, 2006). Audience studies based on the Uses and Gratifications Theory suggest that viewing violence provides a cathartic effect for audiences (Coyne et al., 2010).

The presence of conversational violence is a notable feature of Indian news channels, as highlighted by media analysts. Rajdeep Sardesai, a prominent news anchor in India, has remarked that the current state of Indian news is characterised by a conflict between 'sense and sensationalism,' with noise often prevailing over substantive news (Siddiqui, 2013). Indian news channels are thus criticised for their high decibel levels, expressions of anger, and verbal violence during debates.

Pulwama Terrorist Attack and Indian Broadcast Media

This study examines the presence of conversational violence in Indian news media coverage during a national crisis—the Pulwama terrorist attack. The analysis focuses on prime-time discussions of the Pulwama attack within top-rated Indian English news channels. The Pulwama attack refers to the terrorist assault on an Indian military convoy in the Pulwama district of Jammu & Kashmir on February 14, 2019. This attack, orchestrated by Jaish-e-Mohammed, a Pakistan-based militant group, resulted in the deaths of 40 Indian soldiers (The Hindu, 2019).

In the aftermath of the attack, social media campaigns with hashtags such as #PulwamaTerrorAttack and #WeWantRevenge emerged, accompanied by extensive news channel discussions. Nationwide social media debates surged, calling for retribution. The intensity of the debate escalated when Adil Ahmad Dar, the suicide bomber identified as a Kashmiri resident and a high school dropout,

was revealed to have previously been subjected to beatings by the Indian army (India Today, 2019).

India promptly accused Pakistan of orchestrating the attack, but Pakistan did not initially respond. The Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, ignited calls for retaliation, stating: "I want to tell the terror outfits and those aiding and abetting them that they have made a big mistake. They will have to pay a very heavy price for their actions." He assured a robust response and delegated the responsibility of planning the response to the military (Shah & Ghosh, 2019). In contrast, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan pledged to act if India could provide evidence linking the attack to Pakistan, while cautioning: "I know it's a poll season in India. If India attacks us, we will surely retaliate. It is easy to start a war but difficult to end. The issue should be solved through dialogue" (The Economic Times, 2019). The United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, recommended that both nations remain calm and offered to mediate peace talks. However, India declined the offer, maintaining its longstanding position against external mediation in its relations with Pakistan (Business Standard, 2019).

Methodology

The study examines the news discussions of four prominent news channels—Republic TV (RE), Times Now (TI), CNN News 18 (CN), and India Today TV (IN)—on the day of the Pulwama terrorist attack and the subsequent four weekdays. These channels consistently ranked at the top of the Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC) ratings throughout 2018 in India (Wanvari, 2019). An average of four hours of discussion from each channel regarding the Pulwama attack was selected and analysed qualitatively using the television content critical analysis methodology (Fields, 1988).

The extent and nature of different narratives and conversational violence often depend on the duration allocated for debates. Special reports and breaking news segments can influence the flow of debates, sometimes resulting in extended introductions before the actual discussion. For instance, CNN News 18's debate was combined with a tribute function at Palam Airport hosted by the Prime Minister, while India Today focused more on event reporting rather than engaging in debate on the day of the Pulwama attack. The content analysis was conducted

on transcripts of Pulwama discussions uploaded to the YouTube channels of these news organisations to investigate the presence of conversational violence.

Luginbuhl's (2007) study on conversational violence in news channels serves as the framework for analysis in this study. According to Luginbuhl, the main aspects of conversational violence include allegations of incompetence and allegations of insincerity. Allegations of incompetence involve accusing an individual of being unworthy or incapable of responding adequately, while allegations of insincerity pertain to accusations that the individual is not genuine in addressing the topic or interacting with others.

Instances of conversational violence, including verbal aggression related to insincerity and incompetence, are documented separately. The study also examines the use of harsh language to interrupt, the suppression of dissenting voices, and expressions of anger. Transcripts are coded according to the date of broadcast; for example, 20TI refers to the news discussion on February 20th on Times Now. The specific time references are provided wherever conversations are quoted in the analysis section that follows.

Conversational Violence in the Indian News Discussions

The trend in the discussions in anchor Arnab Goswami's Republic TV was to stand with the nation and the government to revenge Pakistan for the terrorist attack. If anyone raised the issue of intelligence failure or failure of government in stopping terrorist attacks, that person will be confronted by the anchor and the panelists with criticism. Those who are not in line with the abovesaid mainstream thought is confronted with both verbal violence of incompetence and verbal violence of insincerity. Comments like *behave yourself or get out* (14RE 17.43) is an example for that. Arnab stopped the panelists violently at times when they dissented on his points: *one word against the country; I will ask you to get out* (14RE 17.45). In the initial days of the discussions anger and insult was towards Pakistan while in the following days it was directed to those who criticize the government.

Those who spoke on establishing peace between India and Pakistan through diplomatic interventions were branded as antinationals and ambassadors of Pakistan.

Arnab asks: *was Imran Khan reading their minds or they reading Imran Khan's minds? What is the link between the Pakistani apologists in India and the Pakistani establishment? I have been asking this question for the past few days. Are you on our side or are you on their side? Why are some Indians speaking for Pakistan?* (20RE 03.01). Not only the anchor but also the panelists reiterate the rhetoric of nationalism by branding those who demand peace with verbal violence of insincerity: *this was expected when we got the news that there was a blast last Thursday in Pulwama. Instantly we could see the arising of Pakistan not in Pakistan but in parts of India and Delhi and each one defending Pakistan, exonerating the Pakistani. Now this lobby has no loyalty except to money. This lobby sells its mother and motherland for money and that is the truth of the matter. They don't understand anything called national interest or national security. They don't care for the army. When this is against Pakistan let's present a united face. Let us be with the government. Let us be with the armed forces today* (20RE 16.42).

In the debate on 20th February the channel has named out who antinationals are - Prasanth Bhushan, Kavitha Krishnan, Sheila Reshid, Arundhati Roy and Mehbuba Mufti. Their speeches were compared with that of the Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan. Arnab referring to Mehbooba Mufti and Prasanth Bhushan said: *I don't think it is a coincidence, I think they have planned it out. Are they on a WhatsApp group? Are they on instructions? You say this and I say this* (20RE 14.30). The political analyst of Republic TV Gaurav Arya showing HMV logo said: *his Master's Voice; maalika aa aawaz. eek sundhar sa kutha apne maalik ke aawaz sun reha hei* (a beautiful dog is listening to its master's voice) when one of the panelists, Ashutosh was rebutting the ideas of the anchor Arnab (20RE 41.54). Arnab Goswami, the news anchor of Republic TV is the one who has uttered the greatest number of verbal violence among all these four channel discussions. Arnab did not let anyone in his discussions to criticize the government and whenever someone attempted to do that it was confronted with conversational violence.

Times Now too had instances of violence in the discussions like: *aap kuch nahi hei (you are nothing); you are the worst citizens of this country* (14TI 36.55). The opposition party Congress's leader Navjot Singh Sidhu's comment on Pakistan that, it is not a terrorist nation was confronted with serious criticism of insincerity. The activists from Kashmir were also cornered by saying that the Kashmiri

leaders are traitors and termites of the country: *these people have Indian passport; the deputy mayor and people like Sidhu are making great disturbance to this country. When our brave forces are fighting and our brave prime minister is saying that we will revenge and teach Pakistan a lesson Sidhu says this is not a terrorist nation. I think Sidhu is acting on the instructions of Rahul Gandhi who is only pretending to be with the government but deep within he is standing with people who are trying to weaken our country* (18TI 18.48) are some of such narratives of insincerity. Times Now has the greatest number of verbal violence combined, when considered in total both by the anchor and the panelists.

The panelists are more concerned about confronting their political opponent rather than discussing the ways to manage the crisis: *I know your verbal diarrhea. You do not even have a solidarity with the families of those who have lost their lives. Because you are only playing politics. You have been exposed completely* (18CN 31.24). The CNN News 18 tries to bring in a discussion on the response video released by Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan on Feb 20. Though a Pakistan diplomat was invited to the discussion but he was not given enough chance to respond and some of the panelists spoke about Pakistan in derogatory terms in front of him. Nalin Kohli, the BJP spokesperson said: *Pakistan, it is an absolute lunatic place. They live in conspiracies and die in conspiracies. We really don't care about them. They are entitled to live in their world views. No matter how absurd it is.* (20CN 19.54).

In India Today TV also the anchor and panellists argue each other with conversational violence: *Rahul, ask him to be quiet. This is the type of sensitivity the opposition parties especially the congress has* (15IN 48.50). *Sapra, if you are going to politicize it I don't want to hear you. If you have something sensible please tell* (15IN 52.57). The fellow participant in the discussion is confronted with allegations of incompetence and insincerity here also.

There were gestures of violence as raising voices, pointing fingers to the other while talking, standing up in anger, tapping on the desk etc. Both, anchors accused the panelists and panelists accused media in general. Conversational violence occurs when the interests of the party they represent is challenged and a not moral indignation. The comment by one of the panelists to the BJP spokesperson, *it is because of your government that the soldiers were killed* (14TI 32.15) can be considered as the best example for this.

Arguments, at times, were not audible since two panelists talk simultaneously or the anchor speaks while the panelists speak. There were also instances when the audio of one of the panelists is lowered so that the voice of the anchor or another panelist could be heard over the other. That is also considered as verbal violence of incompetence as the anchor and the media thought that they are incompetent to speak then.

There has been instances where both the panelists argue each other with personal comments and the anchor asks them to stop it. At times when the discussion got it emotional switched to Hindi: *kithni bar thappad marengae ek doosarae ko?* (how many times will you slap each other) (14CN 34.32). There has also been instances where the anchor and the panelists jointly corner one of the panelists: Najamu: *aap logo nei naphrath phehlaya* (You people spread hatred). RSN Singh: (asks Najamu) *who are you?* (four times). Anchor accuses Najamu and the PDP party for the comment, *aap logo ne naphret phelaya* (it was you who have spread hatred) and she accuses Najamu's people for spreading hatred (14TI 38.16).

There has been comments to the extent of asking the panelists who criticize the government to go to Pakistan. The Times Now anchor says: *Roch, relax I haven't asked you. You have so much to say. Go to Pakistan and speak to the leadership there* (20TI 24.44). It is also worth noting that the panelists have raised each other's personal matters to discussion. The BJP spokesperson Nalin Kohli said: *he lost his mind after he left journalism and went to Aam Admi Party. Why one person committed suicide because of you and you finding fault of prime minister Narendra Modi* (20RE 50.55) to Ashutosh when he was criticizing the government for its policies on Kashmir.

The channels also tried to make the narratives emotional according to the situation; to create an ambience of sentiments at the martyrdom of the soldiers as: *who will call their families and say their son will not come back* (14TI 00.57) *and for us life will move on; we will move on with our businesses our chores. Life will not be the same for those 40 families* (15CN 51.58). This emotional appeal was brought into arguments in discussion too: *Does Sidhu has the courage to look into the eyes of the widow who lost the dear one and say* (15RE 23.59) and when Vivek Srivastava complaints for not getting a chance to speak but Anchor criti-

cizes him for demanding to speak when 40 soldiers are silenced forever (14TI 31.21) are examples.

Even when the conversational violence of incompetency is discussed, it is interesting to note that some of the panelists, who were official spokesperson were not properly informed of the incident's follow up from their organisations's side. An example would be, RP Singh: *the information is yet to be derived. Who gave you all such information of the explosives?* Tehsin: *he doesn't have proper knowledge.* Anchor clarifies RP Singh that the information has been given out publicly by the ministry (15TI 12.18).

Media and media personnel who deal with the opponents with criticism do not take criticism for themselves. For example, RP Singh says: *The problem is TV channel is judgmental.* Anchor: *You cannot complain media for this. You can complete; but be reasonable* (15TI 19.48).

Conclusion

This study provided an opportunity to examine a frequently observed feature of Indian news media - verbal violence - during a national crisis. The Pulwama attack, which occurred on February 14, 2019, was the deadliest terrorist assault on Indian army personnel since 1989 (BBC News, 2019). The study reveals that despite the gravity of this national crisis and the mourning of fallen soldiers, the debates remained rife with conversational violence. Both forms of conversational violence - those involving allegations of incompetence and those involving accusations of insincerity - were prevalent in these discussions. Both anchors and panellists engaged in such confrontations. Notably, among the nineteen discussions analysed, three did not feature any instances of verbal violence, such as the news discussion on India Today TV on February 20.

Given the seriousness of the Pulwama attack, discussions should have focused on topics such as the impact of terrorism, crisis management, peace-building at the border, and strengthening diplomatic relations with Pakistan to combat terrorism collaboratively. Instead, the debates were overtaken by politicisation, war-mongering, and emotional drama, overshadowing reasoned analysis, factual information, and constructive discourse. Panelists from both the ruling and opposition parties engaged in conversational violence, accusing and shaming each

other rather than engaging in productive discussions aimed at managing the crisis. The presence of anger, raised voices, accusations, and shaming was particularly evident when participants felt their institutional interests were being challenged.

An adversarial style of news presentation, characterised by criticisms of the socio-political system and portrayals of news personnel as defenders of the public, was evident in these discussions. There was also a noticeable tendency to incorporate elements of fictional storytelling into the news, including emotional appeals and conflict. Notably, Arnab Goswami from Republic TV, a leading news channel in India, demonstrated significant conversational violence, which he framed as moral indignation on behalf of the nation when confronted with criticism of the government. Other anchors also positioned themselves as critics of the government, presenting themselves as representatives of the public, a phenomenon noted in previous studies on news anchor stardom (Rai, 2006; Ohm, 2014).

The study was unable to confirm or refute whether news debates are scripted, as suggested by Lunt (2004) and Escoffery (2006), nor could it substantiate Jones's (2005) claim that this represents a new way of conceptualising and discussing politics. However, the study found similarities with previous studies regarding conversational violence in news discussions which creates an emotional atmosphere and builds tension. Further research could explore the role of anger and noise in news discussions, which could expand the scope and future prospects of this study. Additionally, a quantitative analysis of the relationship between conversational violence and a channel's ratings in India might reveal whether there is a significant correlation between them.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and publication of this article.

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Nithin Joseph Elanjimattom is the Director of International Affairs at St Joseph College of Communication, Changanassery. He is an independent mass media analyst and political communication specialist hailing from Kerala, India, currently residing on Walney Island in the UK. With a diverse background in the media industry, Nithin has held significant positions, including serving as the Academic Director at St Joseph College of Communication, one of India's premier media colleges. Nithin also held the position of Editor in Charge for the internet edition of Deepika newspaper,

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