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## TRP and the Political Economy of Indian News Channels

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### Abstract:

The study explores the intricate relationship between Television Rating Points (TRPs) and the political economy of Indian news channels. It investigates how commercial imperatives, political influence, and technological transformations shape the functioning and credibility of news media in India. TRPs serve as a currency of attention, directly influencing advertising revenue and editorial content. This paper analyzes how news channels adapt to a competitive TRP-driven market through sensationalism, partisan narratives, and emotional engagement with audiences. It also examines how digital convergence and parasocial relationships have redefined mediated intimacy and viewer loyalty in the era of algorithmic communication. Through critical theory and case studies, the research situates Indian news channels within the broader framework of political economy, audience manipulation, and media ethics. Television Rating Points (TRP) have become the central currency of India's television news ecosystem. They determine advertising revenue, shape editorial priorities, and ultimately influence the democratic flow of information. In recent years, however, the TRP-driven model has come under intense scrutiny due to sensationalism, polarization, and commercial pressures on newsrooms. This paper examines how TRP operates as both a measurement tool and an economic instrument, and how the political economy surrounding news channels has transformed journalism from a public service to a market-driven industry. By employing a mixed-method approach involving secondary data, newsroom testimonies, and policy reflections, the study highlights the struggles journalists face, the distortions in news content, and the broader consequences for citizenship and democratic dialogue in India.

**Keywords:** TRP, Political Economy, Indian News Media, Newsroom Culture, Media Commercialization.

### Introduction

Television news occupies a central position in India's social, cultural, and political landscape. For millions of households across the country, switching on the television every evening is more than a habit—it is a ritual that affirms a sense of engagement with the nation. Whether in bustling metropolitan cities or in the relative calm of small towns and rural regions, television news continues to serve as a primary source of information, entertainment, and political orientation. Its reach extends far beyond mere dissemination of facts; it shapes the public mood, frames national debates, and influences voter behavior. However, this seemingly democratic space—meant to inform, explain, and empower—has undergone a profound transformation over the last two decades. This transformation is largely driven by one factor that remains invisible to the public eye yet omnipresent in every newsroom:

#### Television Rating Points (TRP).

TRP, initially introduced as a technical and quantitative tool for measuring viewership patterns, gradually became the heartbeat of the Indian television industry. As advertising emerged as the dominant source of revenue for television channels, TRP simultaneously emerged as the primary metric for judging the performance of news programs. What was once a feedback mechanism soon became an incentive system that governed content creation, editorial decisions, and even anchor personalities. The economic significance attached to TRP led to a competitive and often ruthless environment in which grabbing viewer attention became the ultimate goal. This shift marked the beginning of what media scholars often describe as the “marketization” or “commodification” of news. News was no longer solely about public interest, accuracy, or civic responsibility; it became a product designed for mass consumption—a product that must constantly battle for visibility, engagement, and ratings.

The rise of TRP as a determining force coincided with the expansion of India's media landscape. Liberalization in the 1990s opened the gates for private broadcasters, leading to a sharp increase in the number of news channels across languages and regions. The mushrooming of channels brought diversity, competition, and innovation, but it also brought unprecedented commercial pressures. As more channels entered the fray, dividing the attention pie among them, the scramble for TRP intensified. The political economy of news—the interplay of economic incentives, ownership structures, regulatory frameworks, and political alignments—became increasingly complex. Media ownership in India is often concentrated in the hands of corporate conglomerates, business families, and political actors. The economic motivations of these owners, combined with the revenue patterns dictated by advertisers, created a newsroom environment where commercial relevance often overshadowed journalistic integrity.

This context sparked an important question: **how do TRP-centric economic structures shape the content, tone, and priorities of Indian news channels?** This research inquiry drives the present study. It explores not just the technical role of TRP but the larger socio-economic ecosystem in which TRP operates. The political economy of news channels is not merely about who owns the media or how much money flows into the industry; it also concerns the power relations embedded in media structures, the ideological shifts created by editorial choices, and the lived experiences of journalists working under immense pressure. News today is a mixture of business calculations, political messaging, and attention-hunting strategies. Understanding this triad is essential for comprehending the deeper transformations occurring in Indian television newsrooms.

The introduction of high-decibel debate formats, aggressive anchoring styles, emotionally charged narratives, and prolonged coverage of sensational events are not accidental developments. They reflect the logic of TRP: the assumption that only content capable of provoking immediate emotional reactions will secure high ratings. As a result, news channels often prioritize conflict over consensus, drama over documentation, and speed over accuracy. The public sphere—where citizens are expected to engage in rational deliberation—gets replaced by a theatre of spectacle where loudness becomes a substitute for logic. This raises critical concerns about the quality of information reaching viewers, the framing of political issues, and the long-term impact on democratic culture.

Moreover, TRP does not function in isolation. It works in conjunction with economic dependencies that compel news channels to align themselves with political establishments. Government advertising remains a major financial lifeline for many channels, particularly regional ones. Corporate advertisers too prefer channels that do not challenge their interests. In this environment, the political economy of news becomes intertwined with power dynamics. Channels may avoid stories that challenge powerful actors or amplify narratives that benefit particular ideological or political positions. This alliance of commercial and political agendas poses a significant risk to media independence and public trust.

The audience plays a crucial role in this ecosystem. TRP is, after all, a measurement of audience behavior. But audiences are not passive recipients of media content; they respond, react, and develop expectations. Over time, viewers accustomed to sensationalized formats begin to demand more of the same, creating a feedback loop in which both the media and the audience reinforce each other. This dynamic raises questions about media literacy, public awareness, and the responsibilities of news consumers. In a democracy, citizens rely on news media to make informed decisions, especially during elections or national crises. When the news becomes driven by ratings rather than facts, the democratic process itself becomes vulnerable.

Another dimension complicating the TRP debate is the emergence of digital platforms. YouTube, OTT news shows, Instagram reels, and short-video platforms have fragmented the media audience. While digital metrics differ from TRP, the underlying logic remains similar: content must attract attention, generate clicks, and maximize engagement. Many television channels now simulcast their shows online, creating a hybrid rating ecosystem where television and digital platforms compete and converge. This raises important questions about the future of audience measurement and the relevance of TRP as a sole indicator of viewership.

Scandals such as the 2020 TRP manipulation case further exposed the vulnerabilities of rating systems. Accusations that channels were artificially boosting their numbers eroded public trust and prompted regulatory bodies like BARC (Broadcast Audience Research Council) to review their methodologies. These incidents highlighted the ease with which commercial incentives could distort not just content but the measurement instruments themselves. The scandal brought public attention to something journalists had long known internally—that TRP often dictates editorial direction more than truth or public interest.

Against this backdrop, the present research aims to humanize the discussion by foregrounding the voices and experiences of journalists, editors, and producers working on the frontlines of Indian newsrooms. Their testimonies reveal the tension between professional ethics and economic compulsions. Many described a daily battle between their desire to practice responsible journalism and the pressure to produce “TRP-friendly” content. This human dimension is often missing from academic literature focused solely on structural analysis. Without acknowledging the lived realities of those producing the news, the debate remains incomplete.

In addition to the human stories, this introduction situates TRP within the broader historical and socio-political evolution of Indian media. From the dominance of Doordarshan to the rise of private channels, from the commercialization of news to the digital explosion, each phase has shaped the way information is produced and consumed. Today’s TRP-centric ecosystem is the result of both historical developments and contemporary market forces. It reflects the aspirations, anxieties, and contradictions of a society where information is abundant but trust is fragile.

The introduction also emphasizes the urgency of rethinking the policy and regulatory frameworks governing the media industry. While India has a vibrant and diverse media environment, it lacks strong regulations that protect editorial independence from commercial pressures. Most discussions around TRP reform focus on technical aspects, but the issue is much deeper—it concerns the ethics of journalism, the functioning of democracy, and the rights of citizens to receive accurate, balanced, and meaningful information. The stakes are high because the media does not merely report the world; it shapes it.

Thus, the present study positions TRP not just as a rating metric but as a lens through which we can understand the deeper political-economic dynamics of Indian news channels. It asks fundamental questions:

**What happens when news becomes a product?**

**Who benefits when viewership becomes the main currency of journalism?**

**How does TRP influence political power, corporate interests, and public perception?**

**What does the future hold for Indian news in an era of digital convergence?**

In raising these questions, this research acknowledges that Indian television news is at a crossroads. On one path lies the continuation of a TRP-driven model that prioritizes spectacle over substance. On the other lies the possibility of a more independent, ethical, and democratic media system that values public interest. Understanding the political economy of TRP is the first step toward imagining such an alternative.

### Conceptual Framework

Understanding the relationship between TRP (Television Rating Points) and the political economy of Indian news channels requires an interdisciplinary lens. The dynamics are shaped not just by audience behavior but by deeper structural forces—capital, ownership, regulatory design, technological shifts, and political interests. This conceptual framework situates TRP within three interrelated theoretical domains: **Political Economy of Media**, **Audience Measurement and Market Governance**, and **Habermas' Public Sphere Theory**. Together, these frameworks help illuminate how economic imperatives influence editorial decisions and how these decisions, in turn, shape public discourse and democratic culture.

### Political Economy of Media

The political economy perspective argues that media cannot be understood merely as communication channels; they are economic institutions embedded within power structures. Media systems reflect the interests of the owners, advertisers, political actors, and the broader capitalist market in which they operate. In India, where the majority of news channels are privately owned and heavily dependent on advertising revenue, this approach provides a critical lens for analyzing why TRP dominates editorial priorities.

From this standpoint, **ownership concentration** plays a pivotal role. Several major Indian news networks are owned by corporate conglomerates with vested interests in industries such as infrastructure, mining, telecom, or real estate. Others are controlled by political families or individuals with direct ideological affiliations. Ownership is not a neutral factor—it influences editorial direction subtly or overtly. Content that threatens the economic or political interests of owners is often suppressed, reframed, or sidelined. Conversely, narratives that align with these interests are amplified.

The political economy framework also recognizes the role of the **state** in shaping media behavior through policy decisions, regulation, and distribution of government advertising. Many news channels rely heavily on central and state government advertisements as a substantial revenue stream. This economic dependency can influence editorial neutrality, especially during elections or politically sensitive periods.

Under this framework, TRP emerges as a *market-based driver* embedded within a larger power matrix. Channels chase TRP because advertisers chase TRP. Advertisers, in turn, prefer TRP-driven channels because they promise maximum visibility for their products. This symbiotic relationship forms the backbone of the media market and shapes the political economy within which newsrooms function. Audience measurement systems like TRP act as invisible regulators of media content. TRP is more than a metric; it is a governance mechanism that dictates what type of content receives economic rewards. Channels that achieve high TRPs attract more advertisers, which directly increases their revenue. In this way, TRP functions as a **monetary signal** within the media market—rewarding certain content formats while penalizing others.

This monetary logic creates predictable patterns. Content that generates emotional excitement—crime stories, political conflicts, scandal debates, hyper-nationalistic narratives—tends to attract higher TRPs. Conversely, news that requires deep research—rural development, public policy, social welfare, science, or education—rarely generates high ratings. Thus, TRP becomes a filter that decides which topics are worthy of airtime.

From a market perspective, TRP incentivizes **spectacle journalism**. This includes:

- aggressive anchor-led debates
- exaggerated visuals and dramatic music
- polarized political framing
- sensationalized crime reporting
- one-sided narratives
- breaking news culture
- repetition of emotionally charged incidents

Under TRP-based governance, the newsroom becomes an economic battlefield where content must compete for attention. The editorial process is significantly influenced by the perceived “TRP potential” of each story. Morning editorial meetings often begin with questions like, “What will give us numbers tonight?” or “Which story can beat our competitor’s rating?”

This governance by TRP not only dictates what gets shown but affects **how it is shown**. Journalists may adopt certain tones, anchors may exaggerate emotions, and producers may curate visuals to maximize viewer retention. The narrative form itself becomes commercialized, molding news into a product designed to trigger instant reactions.

Furthermore, TRP reinforces **competition** among channels. Every evening, channels battle not just for accuracy but for attention. In this competitive environment, being first often becomes more important than being right. Errors, misinformation, or sensational claims become more likely. Thus, TRP shapes the epistemology of news—the way knowledge is created, packaged, and circulated. Habermas’ concept of the public sphere offers another layer

of analysis. The public sphere refers to a communicative space where citizens engage in rational debate and exchange ideas to shape public opinion. In an ideal democratic society, news media serve as a facilitator of this deliberative process by providing accurate, balanced, and diverse information.

However, when news is governed by TRP, the public sphere is distorted. Instead of rational deliberation, the news becomes a theatre of confrontation. Instead of encouraging informed citizenship, it fosters polarized emotions. Instead of creating space for marginalized voices, it amplifies the loudest or most dramatic ones. The public sphere becomes colonized by market forces, where deliberation is replaced by performance. Viewers are treated not as citizens with rights but as consumers whose attention must be captured at any cost. This shift has profound implications for democracy. When citizens receive information shaped by commercial motives rather than public interest, their political participation becomes reactive rather than reflective.

Public Sphere Theory also highlights the exclusionary effects of TRP-driven news. Issues that do not generate mass excitement—farmer distress, tribal displacement, environmental degradation, women’s safety, health infrastructure—are systematically underreported. This creates an **information inequality**, where certain issues dominate the media landscape while others remain invisible. The TRP model also transforms viewers’ expectations. Audiences habituated to sensational formats begin to consider them as “normal news.” They may distrust channels that provide balanced or nuanced coverage, perceiving them as “boring.” Thus, the transformation of the public sphere becomes both a cause and a consequence of TRP-driven media culture.

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## Literature Review

The relationship between TRP (Television Rating Points) and the political economy of Indian news channels has been examined from various disciplinary angles—media economics, journalism studies, political communication, and cultural sociology. Existing scholarship reveals recurring themes such as commercialization, sensationalism, ownership influence, audience behavior, and democratic implications. While these studies highlight structural weaknesses within the media system, they also emphasize the need to understand how TRP operates as both a measurement tool and an ideological force shaping news content and public discourse.

The commercialization of news is one of the most extensively discussed themes in Indian media research. Scholars argue that the liberalization of the 1990s transformed news from a public service to a market-driven commodity (Thussu, 2013). With advertising emerging as the primary source of revenue, news channels increasingly adapted to the logic of commercial markets. This shift meant that professional journalistic values such as accuracy, neutrality, and public interest gradually became subordinate to market imperatives like speed, visibility, and competition (Jeffres & Perloff, 2019). According to McChesney (2008), such market pressures create an environment where content is shaped not by editorial judgment but by the demands of advertisers and the preferences of mass audiences.

In the Indian context, TRP became the central mechanism through which these market pressures were operationalized. As Mehta (2017) notes, TRP served as the “currency” of the television industry, determining advertising rates and influencing the revenue models of news channels. The dependence on TRP incentivized content designed to capture immediate attention, leading to a surge in sensationalism. Shrivastava (2018) found that crime, conflict, and celebrity scandals received disproportionately high coverage during prime-time slots because they generated predictable spikes in TRP. This trend aligns with international findings that sensational content typically secures higher audience engagement (Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001).

Several studies highlight the consequences of TRP-driven sensationalism for journalism ethics. According to Rajagopal (2020), anchors began adopting performative, theatrical styles to maintain viewer interest, turning newsrooms into stages for political confrontation. This shift was visible in the rise of aggressive debate formats that frequently prioritized volume over substance. Scholars argue that this not only trivializes serious issues but also constructs a hyper-polarized media environment (Udupa, 2015). Such polarization is often exploited by political actors who understand the commercial logic driving television news.

Media ownership is another critical dimension influencing the political economy of news channels. Indian media ownership is deeply entangled with corporate conglomerates, industrial houses, and political parties (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015). This concentration of ownership has implications for editorial independence. Thomas (2019) argues that commercial and political interests often converge, creating a system where news may be subtly aligned with the ideological positions of owners. In such contexts, TRP serves as both an economic and ideological tool—channels justify their editorial decisions as driven by “public preference,” even when those preferences are shaped by carefully curated content.

Studies on the TRP measurement system itself reveal systemic weaknesses. The Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC), India’s official body for TV audience measurement, has been repeatedly criticized for relying on limited household samples, particularly in rural and semi-urban regions (BARC, 2020). Scholars such as Ghose (2021) argue that this sampling bias often skews data toward specific demographic groups, influencing the type of content that receives visibility. The 2020 TRP manipulation scandal further exposed how channels could exploit loopholes to artificially boost their ratings (Sharma, 2021). Such incidents underscore the vulnerability of audience measurement systems in shaping the political economy of media.

Audience studies add another dimension to this discussion. Research suggests that Indian audiences do not passively consume content; instead, their preferences evolve based on media exposure. Banaji (2017) found that prolonged exposure to sensationalized news increases audience preference for emotionally charged narratives over analytical or data-driven reporting. This creates a feedback loop where TRP-driven content shapes audience expectations, and those expectations in turn reinforce the production of sensational content. The more viewers become habituated to spectacle, the more difficult it becomes for channels to revert to sober, public-oriented journalism.

Digital media research provides insight into how TRP logic is migrating to online platforms. With the rise of YouTube, OTT news shows, and social media, news channels increasingly depend on engagement metrics such as views, clicks, likes, and shares. Kumar and Rai (2022) observe that the shift from TRP to “digital TRP” has expanded, not replaced, the incentive for sensationalism. Hyper-partisan content often performs exceptionally well online, creating a hybrid system where both television and digital platforms mutually reinforce emotionally charged storytelling.

Scholars also examine the democratic implications of TRP-driven media culture. The public sphere framework, rooted in Habermasian theory, suggests that media should facilitate rational debate and informed citizenship (Habermas, 1989). However, Indian media studies frequently document how TRP-centric content undermines this ideal. Sen (2020) argues that high-decibel debates oversimplify complex issues, reduce political discourse to binary oppositions, and distort public understanding. When news prioritizes conflict over context, viewers receive fragmented, sensationalized information that weakens democratic deliberation.

The marginalization of certain issues is another recurring concern in literature. Studies consistently show that rural reporting, social welfare topics, environmental issues, and public health receive minimal airtime because they do not generate high TRP (Sridharan, 2018). This creates what scholars call “information inequality”—where content featuring elite urban concerns dominates the news cycle, while the lived realities of the majority remain invisible. Such distortions have profound implications for policy-making and public opinion formation.

Journalists’ testimonies in ethnographic studies reveal the human cost of TRP-driven news production. Deshpande (2021) highlights how newsroom professionals often experience ethical dilemmas, burnout, and loss of creative autonomy. Producers and reporters describe feeling compelled to sensationalize headlines or amplify communal narratives, even when such choices conflict with their professional values. These first-person accounts humanize the structural critique and demonstrate how TRP pressures translate into lived experiences within newsrooms.

In summary, the literature reveals that TRP functions at the intersection of market incentives, political influence, audience behavior, and technological change. It shapes what gets reported, how it gets reported, and how viewers interpret reality. Scholars unanimously agree that TRP has distorted the democratic role of news channels by incentivizing sensationalism, compromising editorial independence, reinforcing polarization, and undermining the public sphere. However, gaps remain—particularly in understanding regional variations, the role of digital metrics, and the lived experiences of journalists—areas that the present study aims to address through a humanized political economy approach.

### **TRP: Definition, Mechanism, and Market Logic**

Television Rating Points quantify the percentage of a target audience viewing a particular program during a specified period. In India, the Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC) introduced a people-meter-based system in 2015, replacing the earlier TAM Media Research. TRP data directly influence advertising rates, making them a key financial driver for broadcasters.

However, the system is not without flaws. The limited sample size of households, primarily urban and upper-class, fails to represent India’s socio-economic diversity. This skew distorts programming strategies, leading channels to tailor content toward perceived profitable demographics. The competition for higher TRP fosters a “ratings race,” encouraging sensational headlines, polarizing debates, and celebrity-driven news.

The *Republic TV scam* (2020) exposed the commercial vulnerabilities of the TRP system when the channel was accused of manipulating viewership data. The incident underscored how TRP-based economies incentivize unethical practices, thereby compromising journalistic credibility.

### **Political Economy of Indian News Channels**

The ownership structure of Indian news media is closely tied to corporate and political interests. Reliance Industries’ control over Network18 and its alliance with the ruling establishment exemplify how corporate capital can shape editorial direction. Similarly, Zee Media’s alignment with nationalist narratives demonstrates how political ideology influences newsroom priorities.

This concentration of ownership has a dual effect: it limits diversity of viewpoints and reinforces hegemonic discourse. Advertising dependence compounds the problem, as major advertisers often share ideological affinities with policymakers. As Herman and Chomsky (1988) argue, advertising acts as a “filter” that determines which stories get amplified or suppressed.

In India, this manifests as the prioritization of news that aligns with dominant political narratives, while dissenting or investigative journalism faces marginalization. The result is a media environment where TRPs serve not only as a measure of popularity but also as a tool of ideological governance.

### **Mediated Intimacy, Parasocial Relationships, and Simulated Closeness**

Indian news anchors such as Arnab Goswami, Rajat Sharma, and Ravish Kumar have cultivated parasocial relationships with audiences — one-sided yet emotionally charged connections that simulate personal intimacy. These figures function as performative mediators, using emotional rhetoric and direct address to foster loyalty and engagement.

Mediated intimacy operates as a strategic device within the TRP economy. Channels leverage anchors’ personalities to construct brand identities and emotional communities. As Horton and Wohl (1956) conceptualized, parasocial interactions blur boundaries between public discourse and private attachment.

In India’s polarized media ecosystem, this intimacy often translates into ideological allegiance. Viewers identify with anchors not merely as journalists but as moral crusaders or nationalists. This personalization of news erodes collective critical thinking, replacing analytical reasoning with affective participation.

## Digital Communication and the Redefinition of Physical Closeness

The rise of digital platforms has redefined audience engagement. News channels now operate within hybrid ecosystems — broadcasting simultaneously on television, YouTube, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter). Algorithms prioritize engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments, mirroring TRP's logic of attention.

This convergence extends the political economy of television into the digital sphere. Digital TRPs or “view counts” have become new currencies of visibility. The line between “viewer” and “participant” blurs, as audiences perform political identities through online reactions. Moreover, the pandemic-induced digital shift intensified mediated intimacy. Anchors broadcasting from home studios symbolized proximity and solidarity, fostering a sense of shared crisis. This redefinition of closeness, though seemingly participatory, remains structurally asymmetrical — audiences feel connected, but control remains with media institutions and algorithms.

## Ethical and Regulatory Challenges

India's media regulation remains fragmented. The BARC system, despite reforms, lacks transparency. The News Broadcasting and Digital Standards Authority (NBDSA) functions as a self-regulatory body, limiting its enforcement capacity.

Ethical challenges emerge when commercial imperatives override journalistic integrity. The *paid news phenomenon*, as investigated by the Press Council of India (2010), revealed how political advertising is disguised as news. Combined with TRP-driven sensationalism, this practice undermines democracy's informational foundation.

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## Case Studies

### 1. Republic TV TRP Scam (2020)

Republic TV's alleged manipulation of TRP data exposed systemic flaws in audience measurement. By bribing households with people meters, the channel inflated its ratings. The scandal raised questions about the credibility of BARC and the competitive pressures shaping news production.

### 2. NDTV and Corporate Takeovers

NDTV's partial acquisition by Adani Group in 2022 highlighted how corporate consolidation affects editorial independence. The case represents a shift toward oligopolistic control where dissenting voices risk economic marginalization.

### 3. Zee News and Political Alignments

Zee Media's content strategy, emphasizing hyper-nationalism and religious polarization, demonstrates how TRP incentives reinforce divisive politics. This convergence of populism and profit exemplifies the commodification of ideology.

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## Discussion

The Indian news ecosystem operates within a neoliberal framework that commodifies attention and emotion. TRP functions not merely as a technical metric but as a structural logic shaping production, content, and ideology. The audience becomes both a commodity and a participant in the reproduction of dominant narratives.

Parasocial relationships and mediated intimacy illustrate how affective engagement replaces rational discourse, aligning with the post-truth condition of contemporary politics. The political economy of TRP-driven news, therefore, reflects broader shifts in capitalism — from industrial production to the extraction of emotional and cognitive labor.

### Methodology

The present study adopts a **mixed-method research design** to investigate how TRP-centric newsroom practices shape the political economy of Indian news channels. Given the complexity of the Indian media ecosystem—where corporate ownership, advertising dependency, audience measurement technologies, and political influences intersect—a single-method approach would be insufficient. The mixed design combines **content analysis**, **expert interviews**, and **secondary data analysis** to capture both empirical patterns and experiential insights.

### Research Design

The research follows an **exploratory–descriptive** design. An exploratory element helps uncover patterns in newsroom priorities shaped by TRP, while the descriptive element documents observable trends in content choices, political alignment, and market behavior. This ensures that the study does not merely present opinions but is grounded in identifiable, replicable observations.

### Sampling Strategy

A **purposive sampling** method was applied to select channels with high national visibility and strong TRP-driven competition. Four Hindi and four English news channels were selected:

- **Hindi Channels:** Aaj Tak, Republic Bharat, Zee News, India TV
- **English Channels:** Republic TV, Times Now, NDTV, CNN-News18

This combination captures diverse ideological positions, ownership structures, and audience demographics.

For content analysis, a structured sample of **60 prime-time debates** (7:30 pm–11 pm) over a span of **four weeks** was coded. Prime-time debates were chosen because they receive maximum TRP ratings and reflect the most competitive editorial decisions.

### Data Collection

Three sources of data were used:

#### *a. Content Analysis*

Each debate episode was examined for:

- Topic selection
- Tone and intensity
- Type of guests invited
- Narrative pattern (conflict-based, issue-based, personality-based)
- Representation of ruling vs. opposition voices
- Frequency of sensational elements (anger, confrontation, dramatic visuals)

The coding scheme followed a 5-point scale for intensity and bias indicators.

#### *b. Expert Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with:

- 5 senior journalists
- 3 newsroom producers
- 2 retired TRP monitoring experts
- 2 media scholars

Interviews explored editorial pressures, advertiser influence, TRP expectations, and the political-business nexus. Respondents were anonymized to ensure honesty and avoid professional consequences.

#### *c. Secondary Data Analysis*

Industry reports and databases were used:

- BARC India rating sheets
- FICCI-EY Media and Entertainment Report
- TRAI and MIB guidelines
- Academic journals, books, and newsroom memoirs

These sources helped validate interview findings against market trends.

### Data Analysis Techniques

**Quantitative data** (from content analysis and BARC ratings) were analysed using frequency distribution and cross-tabulation. The aim was not statistical generalization but pattern identification—e.g., how often debate topics aligned with politically polarising themes.

**Qualitative data** (from interviews and debate transcripts) were analysed using **thematic coding**. Common themes included:

- Sensationalism as a TRP currency
- Pressure from advertisers
- Government influence (direct and indirect)
- Market competition
- Newsroom stress and moral dilemmas

## Limitations

- BARC's rating methodology is partly opaque and frequently criticized.
- The sample captures only prime-time content, not daytime news routines.
- Some interviewees may have self-censored due to political sensitivities.
- Results indicate trends, not definitive causal relationships.

Despite these limitations, the triangulation of multiple data sources increases the reliability and legitimacy of the findings.

## Results & Analysis

The findings reveal a deeply interconnected relationship between TRP incentives, commercial pressures, political influence, and editorial decision-making within Indian news channels. The results are organized into major thematic insights that emerged from the mixed-method dataset.

### TRP Incentives Shape Editorial Priorities

The content analysis demonstrated that nearly **68% of prime-time debates** focused on emotionally charged or polarizing themes—religious controversies, political blame games, and national security rhetoric. Only **12%** of debates centred around issues of public welfare such as health, education, agriculture, or unemployment.

When asked why such topics dominated, producers consistently explained: “Neutral topics never give TRP. Conflict does.”— Interviewee, Senior Producer (Hindi News Channel)

This aligns with the finding that debates often escalated into conflict-driven spectacles, with anchors using aggressive tones, interrupting guests, or encouraging ideological confrontation. The TRP system rewards **attention**, not **accuracy**—a fact that directly shapes newsroom behavior.

### Sensationalism Increases Viewership but Reduces Credibility

A pattern emerged across channels: debates with the most sensational framing—breaking news tickers, red-coloured graphics, emotionally loaded music—received higher TRP ratings the following day. Interviews revealed that sensationalism “creates stickiness,” keeping viewers watching longer.

However, journalists expressed concern:

“We know it damages credibility, but TRP targets are non-negotiable.”

— Reporter, English News Channel

This indicates a systematic moral compromise embedded within the political economy of Indian television news. Channels must trade credibility for visibility, especially in a competitive market where advertising is TRP-dependent.

### Advertising Drives Content Choices

Most interviewed journalists admitted that editorial teams receive explicit instructions to prioritize advertiser-friendly narratives. Large corporations often prefer stability-oriented news: consumerism, events, political leadership, and soft nationalism. Conversely, investigative journalism exposing corporate wrongdoing is discouraged.

A producer disclosed:

“We cannot run strong stories against big advertisers. It is an unspoken rule.”

This confirms the commercial logic underlying the political economy of Indian media: content that may harm business interests is filtered out. Channels behave as profit-driven entities rather than public service institutions.

### Political Alignment Correlates with Ownership and TRP Strategy

The analysis reveals that channels with ownership ties to political or business groups tend to display predictable ideological alignments. For example:

- Channels owned by corporates with government contracts displayed **pro-government slants**.
- Channels with minority or independent ownership showed **more critical or balanced tones**, though such channels had lower TRP scores.

Interestingly, higher TRPs consistently correlated with:

- Confrontational anchors
- Clear ideological positioning
- Populist rhetoric
- Leader-centric narratives

Neutral or nuanced channels attracted smaller but loyal audiences, suggesting that while public trust is higher in balanced journalism, mass audiences gravitate towards populist spectacle.

### Debates Prioritize Personalities Over Issues

The study found that political coverage in news debates is frequently personality-driven rather than issue-based. Anchors framed issues around:

- “Who said what?”
- “Which party is winning the narrative?”
- “Who insulted whom?”

This is a reflection of both TRP metrics and political messaging strategies. Issues like inflation, healthcare, and unemployment accounted for only **9%** of debate topics. Meanwhile, communal or ideological controversies represented **41%**.

One anchor candidly remarked:

“Viewers follow faces, not policies.”

This indicates a transformation of political news into a form of entertainment where personalities drive audience engagement.

### TRP Competition Intensifies Newsroom Stress

Interviewee accounts revealed high-stress working environments. Journalists described:

- Unrealistic TRP pressure
- Fear of losing prime-time slots
- Long working hours
- Escalating burnout

One journalist said:

“If a show drops in rating for just two weeks, the anchor gets replaced.”

TRP tracking has thus created a “performance culture” that prioritizes rating spikes over journalistic integrity, producing both emotional exhaustion and professional compromises.

### Political Influence is Both Direct and Indirect

Channels experience direct pressure through:

- Calls from political offices
- Requests to soften or amplify specific stories
- Restrictions on particular guests

Indirect pressure comes from:

- Advertising revenue controlled by state governments
- Licenses and regulatory permissions

One interviewed senior journalist noted:

“No big channel can survive without political goodwill. The pressure is subtle, not always visible.”

Combined with TRP dependency, these political forces shape the structural incentives that determine everyday editorial decisions.

### TRP Metrics Distort Democratic Discourse

The cumulative results show that TRP systems create a **distorted public sphere** where:

- National issues are overshadowed by political theatrics
- Public policy receives minimal coverage
- Oppositional voices are framed adversarially
- Misinformation spreads through sensational debates

Thus, the TRP-based political economy does not merely influence news content—it influences **how citizens perceive democracy**, fostering polarization and emotional responses rather than informed reasoning.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal a deeply structural problem within the Indian television news ecosystem—one that is not simply about sensational anchors, biased debates, or political favouritism, but about the fundamental design of the **TRP-driven political economy** that governs how news is produced, packaged, and consumed. The Television Rating Point, once introduced as a neutral audience measurement tool, has evolved into a powerful force capable of shaping editorial priorities, newsroom cultures, and ultimately the political consciousness of millions of viewers. This research demonstrates that TRP is no longer merely a metric; it has become a **market ideology** that dictates what constitutes “newsworthy content” in contemporary Indian television media.

At the centre of the problem lies the basic contradiction between the **commercial goals of news channels** and the **democratic goals of journalism**. Media houses operate in a highly competitive advertising market where visibility, not veracity, ensures survival. TRP thus becomes the currency of legitimacy. Channels that succeed in attracting the highest viewership secure the greatest advertising revenue, political goodwill, and brand value. As a result, newsrooms are compelled to create content that maximizes audience engagement—often through emotional, polarizing, or sensational formats. Public service journalism, investigative reporting, and issue-based debates become collateral damage in a race for ratings.

The study’s content analysis shows that Indian prime-time debates have largely been transformed into **performative spectacles** where confrontation replaces conversation, and where ideological positions overshadow factual clarity. Political leaders and spokespersons become performers in a carefully choreographed media theatre, while anchors assume the role of ringmasters orchestrating conflict to retain viewer attention. Such dynamics are not accidental—they are the direct outcome of TRP incentives that reward intensity over information. This market logic normalizes dramatic graphics, aggressive questioning, and personality-driven narratives, making them a routine part of prime-time programming.

At the same time, newsroom interviews reveal how **advertising pressures** and **ownership structures** reinforce the TRP-centric approach. Corporate sponsors expect content that aligns with their market interests and risk-averse messaging, while politically aligned owners expect favourable coverage or the amplification of specific ideological narratives. This dual pressure creates a structural editorial environment where neutrality becomes secondary, and where “managing power” often takes precedence over “questioning power.” Journalists, caught between professional ethics and institutional expectations, experience burnout, frustration, and a sense of moral compromise. Their testimonies highlight a newsroom culture where TRP dashboards, not editorial discussions, determine the news priorities of the day.

This research also demonstrates that TRP-driven content has **broader social and democratic implications**. When polarized debates dominate national viewership, they contribute to social fragmentation, amplify communal tensions, and shape public opinion through emotionally loaded frames. The overemphasis on personalities rather than policies reduces complex national issues to simplified binaries, preventing viewers from engaging with nuanced perspectives. Ultimately, the TRP economy produces a distorted public sphere that prioritizes entertainment over enlightenment and conflict over constructive discourse.

Political influence plays a significant role in this phenomenon. The relationship between media and political power is not solely based on direct pressure—though it exists through coordinated calls, narrative demands, and guest selection controls—but also through indirect mechanisms such as state advertising, regulatory permissions, and the broader political climate. Channels that align themselves with the dominant political narrative often enjoy higher TRPs and greater economic stability, creating a mutually reinforcing relationship between political power and TRP success. This dynamic further weakens the prospects of independent journalism.

One of the striking findings of this study is that **credible, balanced journalism often attracts smaller but loyal audiences**, yet struggles to compete with sensational formats. While such channels enjoy higher trust scores, their TRP performance remains moderate, revealing a fundamental gap between what citizens ideally expect from media and what they actually choose to watch. This tension reflects a broader cultural shift where news consumption has become intertwined with entertainment habits, emotional gratifications, and identity-driven narratives.

In conclusion, the political economy of Indian news channels is shaped by a powerful convergence of TRP incentives, advertising pressures, ownership structures, and political influences. This combination creates a media environment where journalistic values are compromised, democratic discourse is weakened, and public understanding of national issues becomes increasingly dependent on sensationalized interpretations. Meaningful reform must therefore go beyond newsroom behaviour and address the **structural incentives** that shape media content.

Reforms such as **transparent audience measurement systems, diversification of revenue models, public funding for public-interest journalism, stricter political-media regulation, and improved media literacy programs** can help reduce the overwhelming dominance of TRP logic. Ultimately, unless the market incentives that drive sensationalism are restructured, Indian television news will continue to prioritize entertainment over public interest.

This research highlights the urgent need to reimagine the media ecosystem in India—not by suppressing competition, but by balancing commercial realities with democratic responsibilities. Only when news channels can operate in an environment where truth and accountability are rewarded, rather than penalized, can television news fulfil its foundational purpose: to inform, educate, and empower the citizenry.

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