

# Popularity vs. Credibility : An analysis of public perception of sensationalism in Indian television news



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## Abstract

There is no doubt that dense networks of social communication have persisted in modern India. The long lineage and persistence of vibrant and organic tradition of public reasoning, dissent, debate and oral tradition cuts across classes, castes, religions and communities. The development of news channels as a prominent genre of satellite television can be understood in this context. After the barriers due to state monopoly were lifted, there was a special liberating resonance. News television, for the first time, provided air waves as a mass platform to extend the Indian propensity for argumentation and political debate.

The boom in Indian TV news channels is no short of a revolution. The way the content and presentation have diversified in the last decade speaks volumes of how TV news has carved a niche in the audience's lifestyle and mindspace. The 24x7 news relay has gratified the viewers' demand and need of being informed and entertained simultaneously. From the non-glamorous days of Doordarshan in India to the more dynamic Zee news in 90s, there has been a noticeable tilt towards sensationalism in Indian news media with the advent of a new Hindi news channel India TV. What started as a ripple effect to boost TRPs has now cascaded into a chain reaction with every new channel using the sensationalism card to raise its popularity index. However popularity does not necessarily imply credible public perception of either the news content or the news channel.

This paper attempts to explore the relationship between news sensationalism and perceived credibility in the minds of the audience. The paper would use a combination of the case study approach and analytical survey to establish the aforementioned relationship. The research would consist of a case study of at least three news channels and a survey on 50 respondents. The objective of the paper is to make a comment on the *novae-kultur* of sensationalism and exaggeration that has become both the means and end of news presentation on the Indian telescreen. The paper seeks to address the issue of 'breaking news syndrome' in the context of viewers' perception of the same. It would attempt to seek answers about the credibility of news content in the public's psyche.

## 1. Introduction

From one archaic Doordarshan to more than 350 odd television channels, the Indian television scenario has, to use a cliché, come of age. With hundreds other in the pipeline, the momentum is far from setting into inertia. The ambit of satellite TV and its 24x7 nature has revolutionized the news scenario as well. With 24 hours' news channels, the Indian liberal democracy is, to say the least, addicted. The constant relay of information has redefined the contours of the viewers' reception and the newsmakers' intent. From the regular political, social, sports and related fare, the television news media have reshaped the concept of information. More precisely it is infotainment on a roll. Critically, the trend could be assumed as plain sensationalism fuelling stories and TRPs.

Crime, cinema and cricket rule the roost when it comes to news channels in India. All three parameters are the source of constant news feed. The form and presentation of the content is sensationalized in a way to grab eyeballs and has revamped the entire concept of news. Objectivity as the focal news value has undergone a complete makeover. From the conventional idea of reporting without adding perspectives, news on television has become more fancy and perspectivized. This has led to an erosion of public confidence in news content. Yadav and

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Sharma (2006) quote Dr N Bhaskara Rao, chairman of the Centre for Media Studies (CMS), New Delhi, "Studies indicate that the level of public confidence in the media has been on a decline. There are accusations of arrogance, insensitivity, bias, inaccuracies, sensationalism, stereotypes, trivialization, conflict of interest and disappearing lines between advertising and news on the one hand, and between news and views on the other."

Many such news channels which have been accused of sensationalizing content enjoy high TRPs and have been doing well. This implies that they are extremely popular among the audience. However the pertinent issue is that whether their popularity is being perceived at the expense of their credibility? There are serious concerns about the lack of accountability on the part of Indian news channels as also with their rising impression as marketers of frivolous content. But even sensationalism on news channels has a varied degree of occurrence across Hindi and English news channels. This again brings forth the paradox of TV news channels and their perception of their audience. Hindi news channels have more sensational content and form as compared to their English counterparts. Subsequently the parameters of popularity and credibility seem different in this context.

The "Infotainment style" has often been blamed for sensationalism of the news programs broadcast over radio and television. Yet the news has always been enjoyed for as long as it has been exchanged (Stephens, 2006:15). The debate of sensationalism used in the mass medium of broadcasting is based on a misunderstanding of its audience, especially the television audience. Thompson (1999) explains that the term 'mass' which is connected to broadcasting, suggests a 'vast audience of many thousands, even millions of passive individuals'. When sensationalism used through broadcasting is combined with this concept of the passive mass audience, it is assumed the audience consumes all information fed to them. However Thompson continues that the recipients of a message, no matter how sensationalized it is, 'make with it what they will, and the producer is not there to elaborate or to correct possible misunderstanding' (1999:195). Thus it is the misinterpretation of the broadcast audience as passive consumers which is problematic for the use of sensationalism.

Furthermore, while the newspaper is often seen as a more credible source than television news because of television's use of footage over spoken information; they are both sensationalized to the same extent. Television news is restricted to showing the scenes of crimes rather than the crime itself because of the unpredictability of events. Where as newspaper writers can always recall what they did not witness. "No act of violence is beyond the reach of the still formidable magic of words" (Stephens, 2006:280). Furthermore, television news writers have room for fewer words than their newspaper counterparts. Their stories are measured in seconds, not column inches and thus even with footage, television stories are undeniably shallower than most newspaper stories. And because their words are intended for a less acute, less painstaking sense — hearing — television news writers must forswear the more complex formulations a newspaper reporter might hazard (Stephens, 2007: 281).

The Indian mediascape has dramatically changed in the past 15 years. Gradual privatization and deregulation have resulted in increased entertainment-driven rather than public-service oriented news. Marketing pressures, the tabloidization of news, and management and economic pressures are affecting journalism ethics and issues such as accountability, independence, and conflict of interests. True journalism is not having a degree oriented towards conventional news but the ability to raise your voice and to understand and maintain the ethical principles and standards of media. However, media these days whether print or electronic are more bothered about their circulations or TRP ratings and hence never hesitate to feature moments vulnerable to many interpretations. Earlier it was only restricted to local media but now even national TV news networks have started hitting the screen with unusual stories. Some are even creating episodes of their own based on magic and superstition which have nothing to do with news.

## 2. The Entry of Aaj Tak and other News Channels

The first private 24-hour news channel – the Star sponsored NDTV, was launched in 1998. Many other news organizations followed suit leading to a spurt in 24-hour news channels. This phenomenon brought with it the challenge of producing content to fill their round-the-clock requirement, fuelling the trend of sensationalizing stories.

Shortly after in 2000, Aaj Tak became the first standalone news channel being run by a company that published a magazine and ran a printing business. Till then, no news channel had made money by itself and there was trepidation about the success of the business model. But Aaj Tak's "low cost, high technology model" made it possible for it to bring India to people's living rooms and bedrooms. The use Hindi as spoken by people is also considered a factor in its instant appeal. But what got the Indian audience hooked was the concept of "live news" followed by "breaking news". Until Aaj Tak happened, none of the news channels had a single OB van. The raw uncut footage and feel of immediacy in the visuals of live situations transfixed the audience.

This created a upheaval within the Indian private news industry and many other news channels were forced to overhaul their news rooms with greater emphasis on live news. This created a roller coaster with live footage of mega stories such as the Kandahar hijack, September 11 attacks on America, the attack on Indian parliament, Iraq war, Gujarat carnage being beamed to the living rooms.

A dramatic shift was brought about in 2004 when India TV was launched with the motto of focusing on the grassroots issues. However, the channel soon switched to sensational news. Most news items were unusual stories which the channel linked to religious and at times superstitious sentiments, flashing interviews of people from the rural heartland.

With strange occurrences such as spirits entering bodies and idols of gods drinking milk, the fare on the channel not only gripped but also entertained the audience. The channel has on many occasions been accused of spreading superstition and panic amongst its viewers as is demonstrated during the coverage of the Big-Bang experiment in Vienna, when the news

channel had experts predicting the end of the world.

The instant success of India TV created a flurry with other Hindi news channels trying the same formula of sensationalizing stories. Though many channels did not clone the India TV style, they tried to compete by blowing stories out of the proportion. One such story was that of Gudia aired by Zee News in September 2004, whose first husband, whom she assumed dead and remarried, returned after being released as a prisoner of war. The village panchayat of Muslim clerics ruled that Gudia – then 8 months pregnant, must go back to her first husband. The story was telecast live on the channel.

### 3. The Spate of Stings on TV

Sting operations went mainstream in 2001 with many news channels resorting to them to generate sensational content to grab eyeballs. With undercover reporters and hidden cameras being used for these stings, many of which exposed celebrities, it brought a huge amount of drama on screen.

One of the most controversial sting operations was carried out by Tehelka, a dot com, which exposed senior leaders of the ruling political party accepting bribes to approve defense contracts. India TV too used the sensationalism card well in the string of sting operations that it conducted. Its sting operation on television and Bollywood personalities demanding sexual favors in exchange of roles – dubbed as the ‘‘casting couch’’, caused a furore.

The expose managed to raise the TRP of the channel for a few days and generate a huge SMS feedback. Shortly after, the channel caught three legislators of different political affiliations, in sexual acts with women. The channel was sued for showing obscene content and the politicians charged that the footage was morphed.

A channel went to the extent of broadcasting a fabricated sting operation on a school teacher for allegedly luring her pupils into prostitution. The sting triggered off a debate on the ethicality of such operations. Jaya Jaitley, a senior politician, said on a national television show : ‘‘I don’t think sting operations are the answer to India’s problems. This is a case of vigilantism — creating a crime, hanging the person in public and making money out of it.’’ Senior journalist V K Shashikumar disagreed: ‘‘A ‘sting’ is a tool and not an end. Sting operations have to be carried out within ethical parameters and it is up to the channel and the editors to set those parameters.’’

### 4. The ‘Prince’ Saga

The non-stop live coverage of the ordeal of the five-year-old son of a laborer near Delhi who fell into a 55-feet deep pit in July 2006 captured huge audience. This event had been broadcast live on many news channels for more than 24 hours. A CCTV camera that had been lowered into the pit had been broadcasting live pictures of Prince as he waited to be saved. But that was not all. TV channels broadcast special prayer meetings held all over the country for the youngster’s safety. News anchors all over defined this episode as national crusade. In fact media’s coverage of the event backed by millions of

viewer SMSes came across as a historic chapter in the context of national unity. The coverage of this story exemplifies what 24 hours coverage could do to an issue. However the emotional fare that sensationalized it poses serious questions.

## 5. Hindi News Channels – A Case Study

Private news channels have today created their own parallel universe of what constitutes news. In 2000, when Aaj Tak launched, its then unique brand of news delivery, breaking news, location reports, colloquial language was revolutionary for an audience used to Doordarshan’s dreary, studio-locked news bulletins. But with the proliferation of other 24-hour news channels, this formula also became stale. And thus began the search for clutter-breaking programmes, the snowballing process of news tabloidisation, crime shows, hidden camera exposes, Star scandals and sexual escapades. Festivals like Karwa Chauth became the main news of the day. A study conducted by the **Centre for Media Studies (CMS)**, an independent non-profit research organization, which picked six Hindi news channels as its sample in 2008 established that news is among the most-watched categories on television in the country and Hindi news channels command higher ratings than their English language counterparts. ‘‘The TRP (television rating point, which reflects the percentage of people watching a particular programme at a given time) menace has hijacked the agenda of news channels,’’ CMS chairman N. Bhaskar Rao said. ‘‘While it is good that the stronghold of political news is declining, what is replacing it is crime and Bollywood gossip.’’

### 1. The Breaking news Syndrome

*NewsLab*, an American resource portal for journalists says that the definition of ‘breaking news’ has changed so much that a breaking news label is no longer helpful to viewers trying to determine the relative importance of what’s on the news. In fact, breaking or non-routine news is defined as hard, unplanned news that takes the newsroom by surprise, such as a plane crash or earthquake. *NewsLab’s* content analysis of two constructed weeks of CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC was used to explore how often the networks ‘‘break in’’ and what types of stories are labeled ‘‘breaking.’’ The networks were videotaped 24-hours a day for two weeks in 2004. Of the 474 breaking news stories aired on all three cable networks over the two weeks, 19.8 percent were planned events that do not fit under the current definition of non-routine news.

The trend seems to have made inroads successfully in the Indian TV news scenario. In fact India TV’s daily news telecast at 10 pm is called ‘*Breaking News*’. Every routine news fact or information is passed off as breaking news. There are bizarre stories of the likes of a monster tree, a supernatural village, a man predicting his death (and in turn being covered by all news channels for 24 hours and then not dying) and one of the recent stories of the re-marriage of the Taliban terrorist Baitullah that have constituted the prime time fare. All these planned stories are tagged as ‘Breaking News’. The other Hindi channels follow suit by choosing suitably absurd themes to establish the trend beyond doubt. *Aaj Tak*, rated as the most popular channel, did a story ‘*Don ka Pyar*’ in March, 2008 based on the life of underworld player Chota Rajan with flashes of breaking news. Another sensational breaking news story that could qualify as an example was of the late astronaut Kalpana

Chawla's rebirth in Bulanshahar, Uttar Pradesh.

## 2. Crime shows on Hindi News Channels

Crime shows have become quite the rage on news channels. Almost every news channel has two, if not more of them. From *Red Alert* to *Vaardat* and *Crime Reporter* to *Sansani* and *Jurm*, to almost a dozen other shows, there is an array of rape, murder, incest, dowry death, adultery and other stories to choose from. Most of these shows re-create the actual crime wherever needed as vividly as possible to give the viewing audience a real taste of it. They try to bring the viewers face-to-face with the gory world of crime all over the country. The one year old case of the NOIDA double murder of Arushi Talwar and her servant broke all barriers of responsible journalism, with a new angle being flashed across news channels as 'breaking news' without any verification to refuting it as another 'breaking news' later.

## 3. Soaps and Comedy Galore

The news channels also fill their 24 hours with exaggerated doses of rerun of popular comedy shows from the general entertainment channels. The comedians' dialogues flash across the screen just like any other news item. Besides there are customized programmes that narrate tales of popular TV soaps and make future predictions on the plot. Some of such programmes doing rounds on Hindi news channels include *Saas, Bahu aur Saazis* on Star News; *Saas, Bahu aur Betiyan* on Aaj Tak, *Serial Jaisa Koi Nahi* on IBN7 among others. According to P N Vasanthi of centre of Media Studies (CMS), it has really become difficult to differentiate between news and entertainment channels. According to a research conducted by CMS, the graph of prime time television news on major national channels shows how the proportion of news on entertainment has gone up from 6% to almost 16% in the last four years.

## 4. Cricket and Cinema

Cricket-focused programming on news channels with resident cricket experts and saturation coverage has become the standard way of covering Indian cricket. Every match is dissected across many channels in great detail (graphic as well with cricket experts all dressed up to enter the field), with the media alternating between baying for a player's blood and praising him to the sky. Besides in the recent past the Indian Premier League (IPL) became a huge platform capable of sensationalism. From the glamorous owners who own the IPL teams to their controversies, news was full of juice and scoop about them and their players.

The Abhishek Bachchan- Aishwarya Rai wedding and the Saif-Kareena affair are blatant examples of media's obsession with Bollywood. From talking about films and cinema, the news channels indulge in hours of discussion on sensational personal escapades of film personalities. A case in point here is the infamous 'breaking news' of Aishwarya Rai's marriage to a tree before she married Abhishek Bachchan to ward off some astrological problems in her life.

## 6. Survey Based Analysis

A survey was conducted with a focused sample of 40 respondents in the age group of 18-25 years. The respondents

belonged to the urban strata and were chosen keeping in mind that they watched news on television.

## 7. Questionnaire

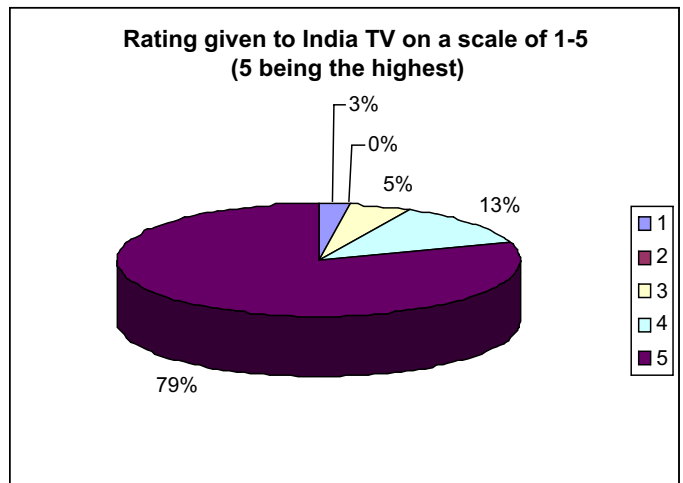
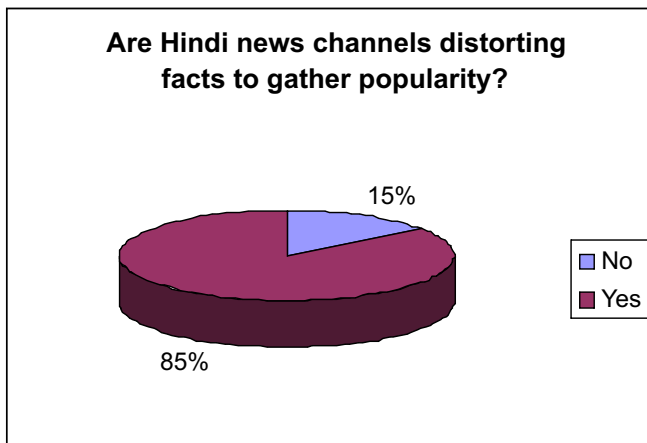
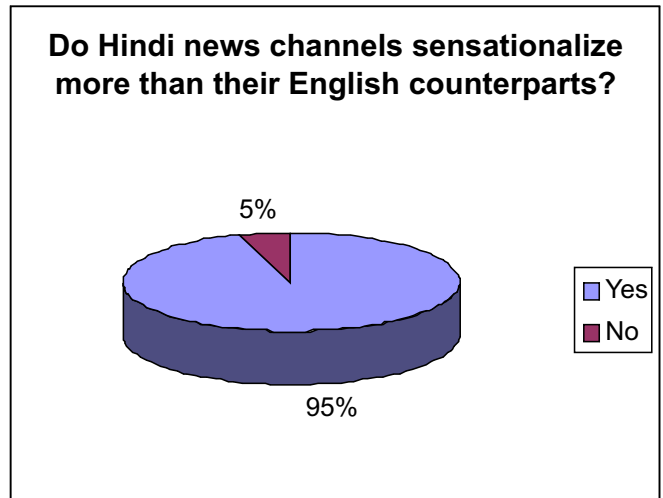
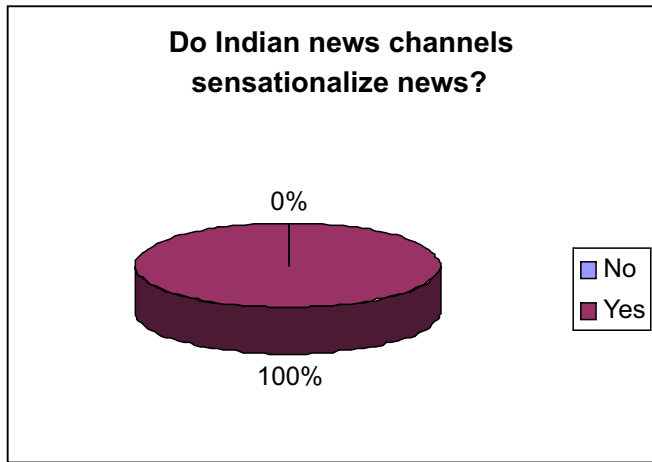
- Do Indian news channels in India sensationalize news?
  - Yes
  - No
- Do you think Hindi news channels sensationalize more than English News channels?
  - Yes
  - No
- Do you think that Hindi news channels are distorting facts to gather popularity?
  - Yes
  - No
- Please rate the following news channels on sensationalism on a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 denotes the highest level of sensationalism.
  - India TV
  - Star News
  - IBN7
  - AajTak
  - NDTV India
  - NDTV 24x7
  - CNNIBN
  - Times Now
  - Zee News
  - Sahara News
- What according to you is the relationship between sensational news and its credibility?
  - Sensational news is inversely proportional to credibility
  - Sensational news is directly proportional to credibility
  - There is no connection between sensational news and credibility
- Do you think the following events were sensationalized by the Hindi news channels? Write (Yes), (No), (Can't say) against each option.
  - Abhi-Ash wedding
  - Vienna Big-bang experiment
  - Recent solar eclipse
  - T20 world cup
  - Saif- Kareena relationship
  - Any other that you may recall.....
- Do you rely on news channels for a credible relay of news?
  - Yes
  - No
- Which is the most credible news channel according to you?
  - India TV
  - Star News
  - IBN7
  - AajTak
  - NDTV India
  - NDTV 24x7
  - CNNIBN
  - Times Now

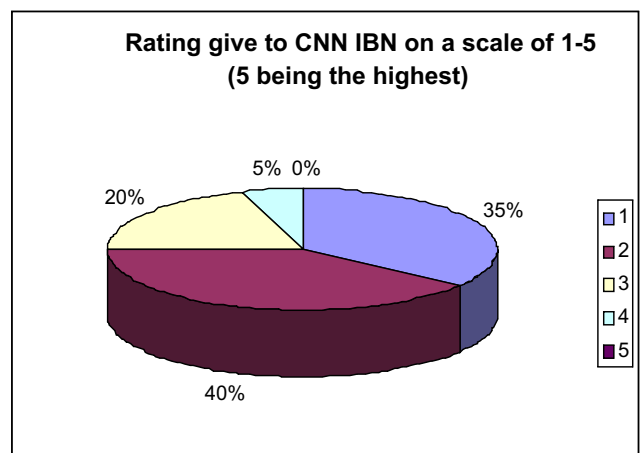
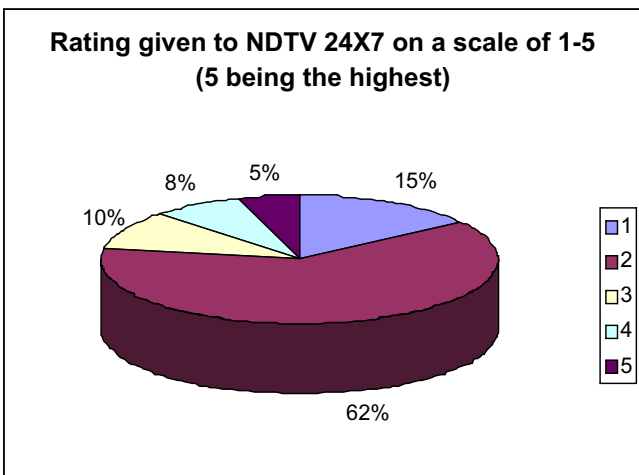
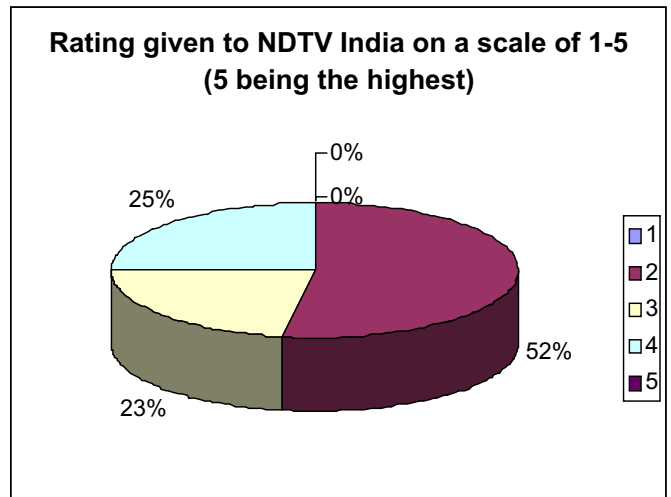
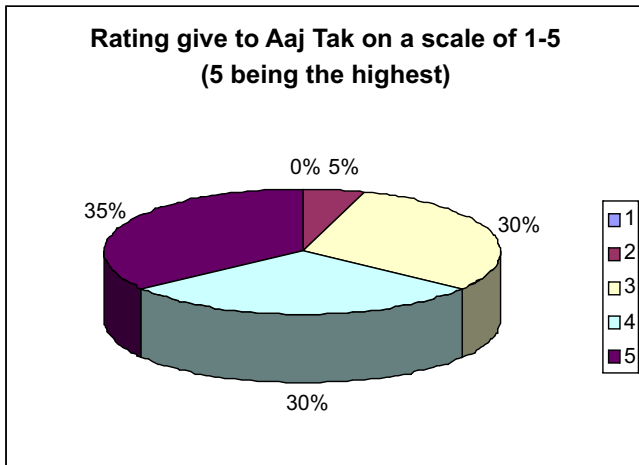
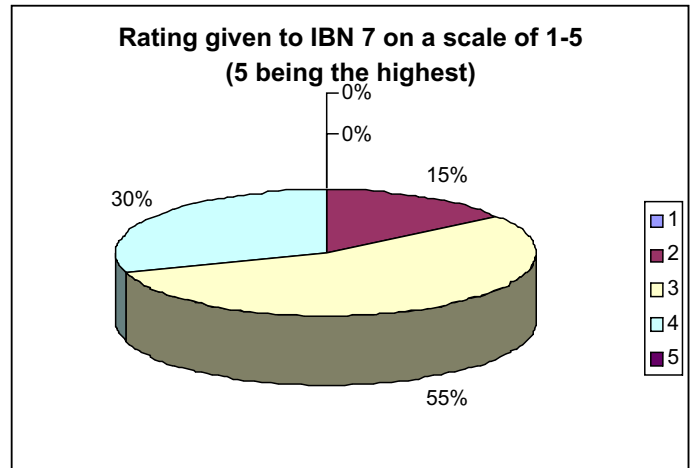
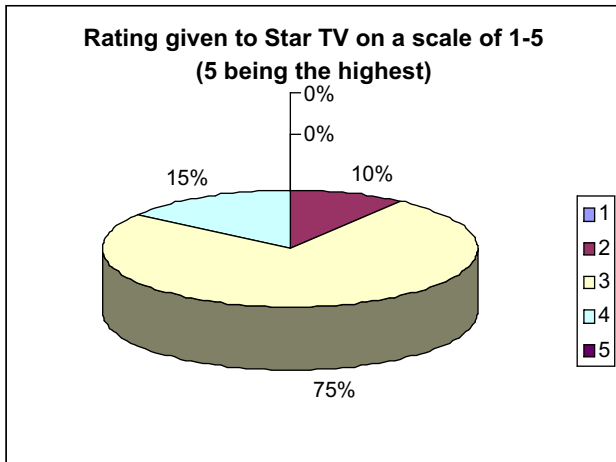
- i) Zee News
  - j) Sahara News
- 9) If given a chance what changes would you like to make in the Indian news channels?  
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- 10) Do you think sensationalism should be totally done away

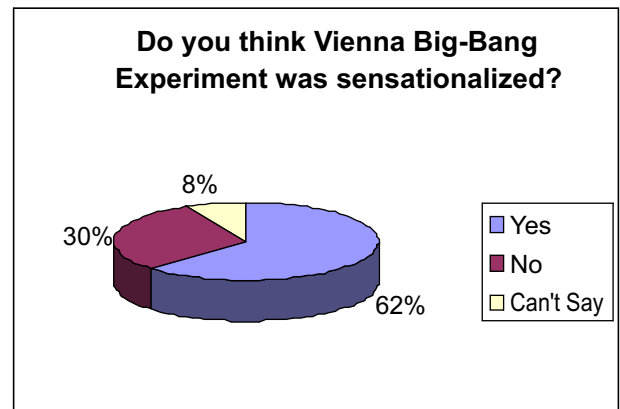
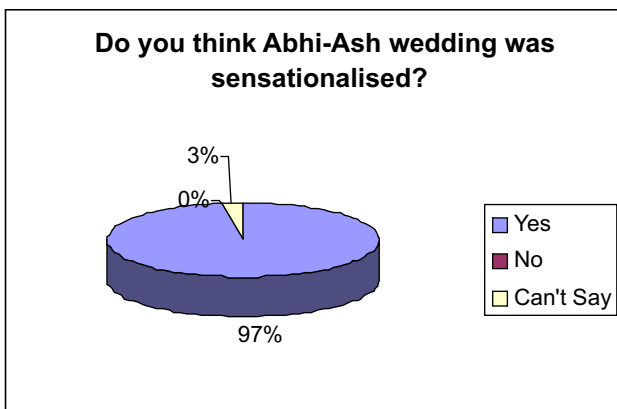
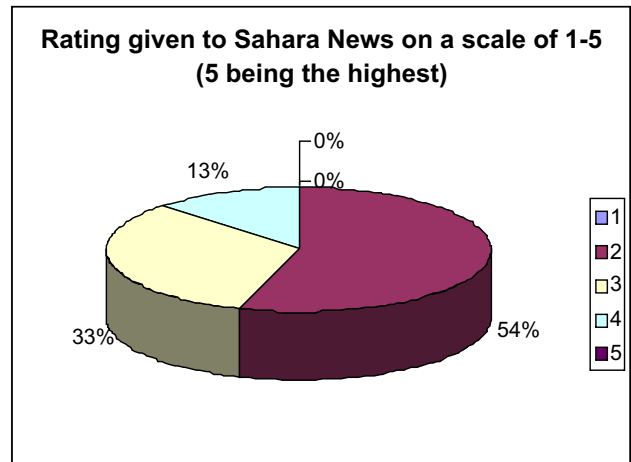
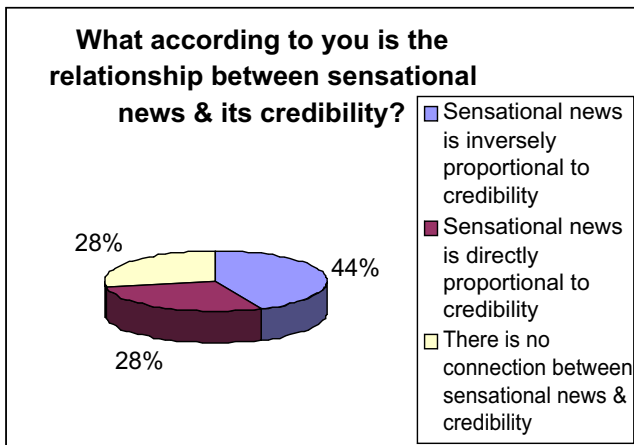
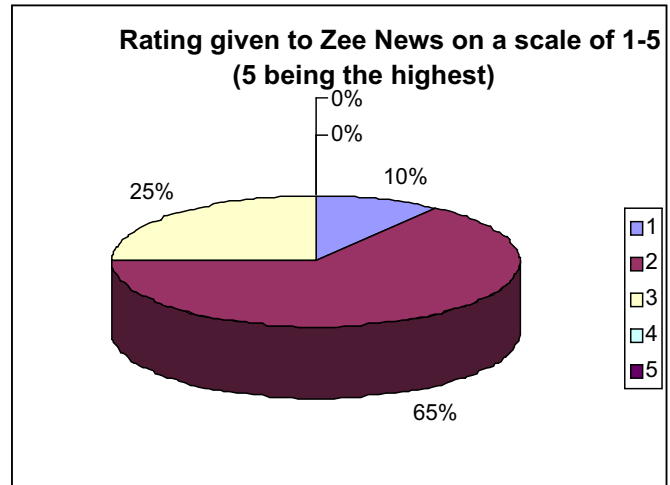
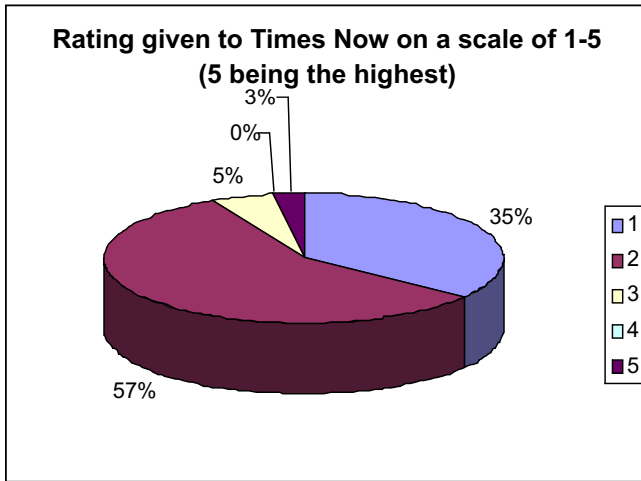
- with on news channels?
- a) Yes
  - b) No
  - c) There should be a balance
  - d) In my opinion.....

Analysis

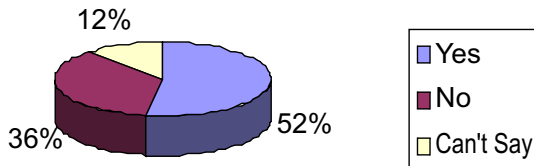
**Observations**



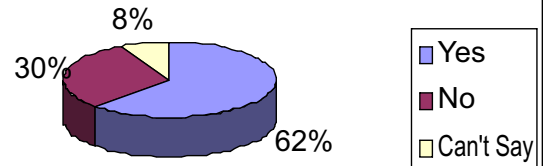




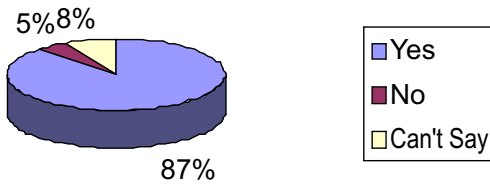
**Do you think recent Solar Eclipse was sensationalized?**



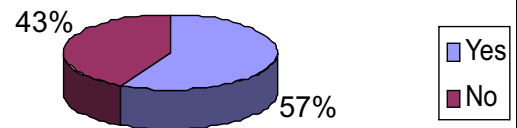
**Do you think T20 World Cup was sensationalized?**



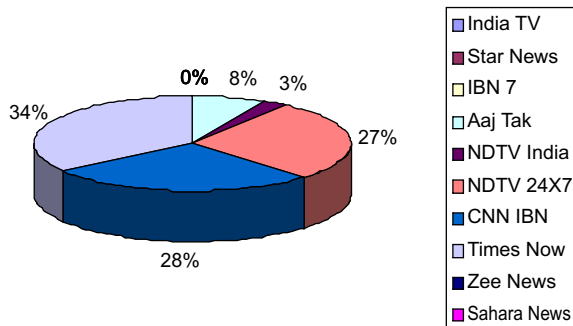
**Do you think Saif-Kareena Relationship was sensationalized?**



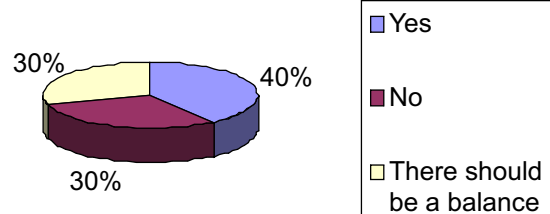
**Do you rely on news channels for credible relay of news?**



**Which is the most credible news channel?**



**Should sensationalism be done away with on news channels?**



There has been a noticeable shift towards sensationalism in news content since the launch of 24-hour news channels. The phenomenon of "live" and "breaking" news has also been used to add drama on screen, at times distorting facts and misleading the audience. A large number of news channels, particularly, Hindi ones, have seen a rise in popularity due to sensational content including sting operations.

However popularity does not necessarily imply credible public perception of either the news content or the news channel. In fact the audience seems to be able to distinguish between sensational and credible news content. The respondents surveyed are unanimous in agreeing that Indian news channels sensationalize news content, with Hindi news channels leading the pack. A large majority of the respondents felt that Hindi news channels were distorting facts to gain popularity. India TV was rated the most sensational news channel by as many as 79 per cent respondents, while CNN IBN and Times Now, both English news channels, were rated by 35 per cent respondents each as the least sensational. While Aaj Tak, a Hindi news channel was perceived to be tilting towards sensationalism, other Hindi news channels such as Star TV, IBN 7 were perceived to be a balanced mix of sensational and credible content.

Times Now was perceived by the majority as the most credible news channel followed by CNN IBN, NDTV 24X7 and Aaj Taj. The findings reiterated that the respondents perceived Hindi news channels to be more sensational as compared to the English news channels.

A majority of 44 percent respondents perceived sensational news as inversely proportional to credibility, while 28 per cent felt there was no connection between the two. With respect to news coverage of the Abhi-Ash wedding, the Vienna Big Bang experiment, the recent Solar Eclipse, the T 20 World Cup and the Saif Kareena relationship, a majority of the respondents perceived these events to be sensationalized by news channels. Ninety seven per cent of the respondents felt that the Abhi-Ash wedding was sensationalized, while 62 per cent held that the coverage given to Big Bang experiment was melodramatic and misleading. Eighty seven per cent also agreed that the Saif Kareena relationship was sensationalized.

Only 57 per cent of the respondents said they relied on Television for credible news. However, 30 per cent do not want television channels to do away with sensational content. Another 30 per cent want a balanced mix of sensationalism in

their daily dose of news. While some respondents felt strongly felt that television news should be purely informational in nature and there should be tough screening guidelines, a large majority felt that sensationalism in small levels was needed to evince interest in news. They felt that Television channels should take care to limit sensationalism and prevent the spread of superstition.

## 8. Conclusion

There has definitely been a noticeable tilt towards sensationalism in Indian news media with the advent of a new Hindi news channel. What started as a ripple effect to boost TRPs has now cascaded into a chain reaction with every new channel using the sensationalism card to raise its popularity index. However popularity does not necessarily imply credible public perception of either the news content or the news channel. The audience can discriminate between content and sensationalism. It's high time that these news channels acknowledge the audiences' sensibilities and regulate their content with discretion.

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