

# Indian media and its transformed public

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*Indian media has witnessed an unprecedented growth over the last two decades. This expansion does not necessarily lead to greater democratic participation for the very idea of the 'public' has undergone a transformation, evident in: the ideological content of the media, the extra-national membership of the public sphere and the interactive form of publicness. The article argues that the media plays a crucial ideological role in recasting public discourse in India, a role which is rendered more effective because of a strong synergy between its substance and style. An often strident appropriation of the nation and the Indian 'public' by a middle class ideologically aligned with the project of liberalisation is most evident in the media today. This is done in two ways: by an overt ideological defence of an unbridled market and an attack on the very idea of an interventionist and welfare state; and by the everyday quotidian features and news that inscribe corporate speech, create a new imaginary of a global Indian and a global Indian middle class. This contention may be sustained from a scrutiny of the media even when the period is a random month (24 May–23 June) of a random year (2007), as is the case here.*

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**After decades** of sedate existence, the Indian media universe has witnessed a 'big bang' of sudden and gigantic expansion. The most spectacular changes are in television, where 24×7 news channels, reality programmes, chat shows, sting operations, celebrity weddings and birthdays, beauty pageants, award functions, sports events, natural disasters, political crises, music channels, tarot readings, stand-up comics and competing

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religious discourses jostle for space and attention. There are in all 622 TV channels either already operating or planning to commence operations in India.<sup>1</sup> The growth in print media has been no less remarkable (Jeffrey 2000; Ninan 2007). The two most widely read Hindi newspapers, *Dainik Jagran* and *Dainik Bhaskar*, together recorded a total of 89.8 million readers in 2008, while the most read English daily, *The Times of India*, had 13.3 million readers.<sup>2</sup>

This article argues that these momentous changes in the Indian media world have transformed the idea of the public and the public sphere (Rajagopal 2001). It is divided into three parts: Part I introduces the basic stance of the article and outlines the overall argument. Part II looks at the transformations that the 'public' has undergone. Part III analyses the ideological role that the media seems to have appropriated for itself in shaping the dominant public discourse.

The empirical material presented here is based primarily on the content provided by several TV channels (including Times Now, CNBC, NDTV, Sony TV, Zee TV and Star TV) and one newspaper, namely, *The Times of India (TOI)*,<sup>3</sup> over a period of one month between 24 May and 23 June 2007. However, the argument about a transformed 'public' that I seek to put forward has emerged from a longer study of the media since the early 1990s, the beginning of the period of liberalisation in India. I contend that this argument may be sustained from a scrutiny of the media even when the period is a random month of a random year, as is the case here.

## I

### *The argument*

Standard civic textbook learning suggests that expansion and transformation of the media can only lead to greater democratic participation. However, it is now widely recognised that the relationship between free media and deliberative democracy is not so straightforward (Habermas 1989; Macintyre 1962; Therbon 1977). I argue, therefore, that the very idea of the 'public' as in standard classical liberal theory has undergone

<sup>1</sup> www.Scotmag.com, January 2009, accessed on 20 January 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Indian Readership Survey, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> *Times of India (TOI)* has been a pioneer in introducing the new forms and content that has transformed the media.

a transformation. I argue further that this three-fold transformation is evident in: the *ideological content of the media*, the *membership of the public sphere* which now stretches beyond the territorial nation to include the increasing presence of the Indian diaspora, and the interactive *form of publicness*. A central argument of this article is that the media plays a crucial ideological role in legitimising neo-liberal capitalism in contemporary India. This point needs to be emphasised precisely because the dominant language of the media is apparently non-ideological and apolitical. Likewise, corporate control or market censorship becomes more difficult to discern because it is expressed in the language of choice and freedom (Chaudhuri 2005a). Not surprisingly, when the draft Bill to prevent monopolies through 'restrictions on accumulation of interest' was sought to be passed, it was condemned by the media industry as 'anti-consumer, anti-choice and anti-market'.<sup>4</sup>

I find it useful to draw from Conrad Lodziak to buttress my stance that the form (and not just the content) of ideology has to be looked at in order to appreciate how it works. Lodziak argues that ideologies do not generally motivate people, who are motivated by quotidian, everyday realities rather than abstract explicitly articulated doctrines, such as socialism, liberalism, neo-liberalism, religious fundamentalism and so forth (Lodziak 1995: 40). I concur with Lodziak that the media today does communicate 'a range of popular expressions' through news, features, stories, adverts and expert views.<sup>5</sup> However, I also argue that the media actively promotes explicitly articulated neo-liberal doctrines on the market and the state, and further, that there is a synergy between the substance and style of contemporary media. Thus, racy language and combative anchors with a weakness for scandals and conspiracies are an integral part of the ideological discourse. For 'entertainment and media industries increasingly rely on gossip to stay ahead of rivals'.<sup>6</sup>

I turn now to the second aspect of the transformed public, namely, its interactive nature and the greater presence of the ordinary and the local. This presence of the ordinary public is most visible in the burgeoning

<sup>4</sup> Ammu Joseph, 'The Broadcast Bill and the Public Interest', *The Hindu*, 1 July 2006.

<sup>5</sup> I have in an earlier piece argued how both strategies have been at work in the context of media's representation of feminism. See Chaudhuri (2000).

<sup>6</sup> 'Gossip!', *Times Life, TOI*, 30 July 2006.

growth of talk shows, reality shows and various singing and dancing contests (such as the *Indian Idol* on Sony TV, *Sa Re Ga Ma* on Zee TV, *Star Voice of India* on Star TV, *Nach Baliye* on Star Plus TV and *Zara Nach Ke Dikha* on Star One) where public votes decide the winner. Most channels also have a current issue on which the audience can mail their opinions. Newspapers too have regular opinion polls. The numbers who participate are often staggering, for example, *TOI* reported that *Kaun Banega Crorepati-II* received over 130 million and *Fame Gurukul* received 50 million responses through SMSs. An ordinary SMS costs just fifty paise, while that sent for voting on a reality show costs between two and three rupees, depending on the arrangement with the TV channel hosting the show.<sup>7</sup> In print media there is more local news—the staple of success for Indian-language newspapers—which publicises people and issues that would have been ignored in the past. Does this ‘publicity of the public sphere’, as Jefferson (2000: 210) puts it, change politics?

Do the compulsions of commerce imply that there is no longer any merit in the classical liberal defence of the freedom of the press as being necessary for the cultivation of opinion beyond the state (Thompson 1995: 239)? I think the state remains critical, central as it is in navigating the entire set of market transformations that this article deals with. What is important however is to appreciate the changes that the state has undergone and the ensuing changes in its relationship with the media. A brief reference to the past may be in order here. If the state was the defining institution against which the free media was defined in 19th century England, in colonial India public opinion was nurtured and channelised by the nationalist press against the colonial state. In the first four decades of Independent India as well, it was the state which expected the media to spread the spirit of self-reliance and national development among the people. And except for the nineteen months of the Emergency declared by the Indian state in 1975, the press *did* enjoy relative freedom. However, as Purnima Mankekar notes, most people were well aware that news about domestic politics on All India Radio and Doordarshan was censored by the state (Mankekar 1999: 354). The opening up of the media to private channels in the early 1990s was thus widely seen as freedom from state censorship. This perception is not unique to India. For early

<sup>7</sup> *TOI*, 29 October 2006.

liberal thinkers, the main threat to individual liberty did stem from the state. The Indian state for a good four decades after Independence was indeed the central actor.<sup>8</sup>

These assumptions can no longer be taken for granted almost two decades since the Indian state introduced the new economic reforms. With the transformation of media organisations into large-scale commercial entities, freedom of expression is threatened not from state power but from the commercial concerns that govern media organisations. The assumption of a media that is 'national' is also difficult to sustain with the development of transnational networks leading to the globalisation of communication as well as the emergence of a global or transnational capitalist class (Robinson and Harris 2000; Sassen 2002). As a consequence, the configuration of issues that confront us is qualitatively different.

I am not arguing that the state is no longer important or that the hegemonic 'national imaginary' has ceased to exist. I argue instead that the Indian state has been transformed and that Indian nationalism is not quite what it used to be. This is a point that has been widely noted, albeit in different ways. In a pre-liberalised India, even studying the middle class 'may have seemed an "unworthy" or self-indulgent topic' for the social scientist's mandate was to act on behalf of the 'people' who constituted the nation (Deshpande 2003: 128). Today the nation and the public is increasingly being appropriated by the middle class. In the context of gender and development, Mary John has argued how production was no longer a definitive identity for a liberalising Indian nation whereas at another time the working class woman was a national icon (John 1996). If the rhetoric of globalisation in the early 1990s was about the reinvention of the thrifty Indian housewife as a profligate woman consumer (Chaudhuri 2001), today the national icons are the women CEOs who are lauded as 'India Inc crashes through the glass ceiling'.<sup>9</sup> Very significant class and gender reconfigurations accompany this recasting of the nation. The rhetorics of globalisation initiate, accompany and legitimise

<sup>8</sup> This was true in all fields, be it gender, culture or development (see Chakravarty 1987; Uberoi 1996; Vasudevan 2000). Ravi Vasudevan observes that most articles of his volume on Indian cinema have 'the state as a prominent factor in the shaping of cultural forms...' (2000: 14).

<sup>9</sup> *TOI*, 18 January 2009.

the changing nature of capitalism, nationalism and the idea of 'public'. It has been argued that nationalism is no longer what it used to be for there is a 'visible ascendancy of the transnational fraction of capital in India even if the contest with other fractions is as yet not a foregone conclusion'.<sup>10</sup> Another contention has been that the erstwhile hegemony of an essentially nation-based capitalist class has been replaced by a transnational capitalist class (TCC), which is the fraction with the greatest influence on international institutions, that today has an increasing say in the running of nations. This network of high profile corporate executives, bankers, brokers, financial management experts, media managers, academics and bureaucrats use the most modern means of communications to create a new world of ideas (Chimni 2004). I seek to locate both the transformations of the public and the visibility of the diaspora in the Indian public sphere in this context.

This often strident appropriation of the nation and the Indian 'public' by a middle class ideologically aligned with the project of liberalisation is most evident in the media today. I argue that this is done in two ways: by an overt ideological defence of an unbridled market and an attack on the very idea of an interventionist and welfare state; and by the everyday quotidian features and news that inscribe corporate speech, create a new imaginary of a global Indian and a global Indian middle class.

## II

### *The transformed 'public': Visible, interactive, ordinary and diverse*

This section examines what I identify as key elements in the transformation of the media and of the 'public': the increasing visibility of political personages, its growing interactive nature, the inclusion of the ordinary and diverse representations. At an apparent level they all suggest greater public participation. However, while there is indeed greater interactivity, inclusion and visibility of both political personages and ordinary public, they do not add up to a more critical public sphere.

One of the features of this transformed visibility of the media is the 24x7 phenomenon with its continuous flow of information, entertainment

<sup>10</sup> Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, 'Nationhood and frequently unasked questions', *The Hindu*, 4 August 2005, p. 10.

and 'breaking news'. The most momentous news is 'broken' only to be replaced by yet another momentous story. This 'communicative abundance' (Keane 1991) does not necessarily lead to an informed and engaged public. For the media channels, this abundance means severe competition to survive and be the centre of news for the day. Most TV channels now preface their news with a 'Times Now has reliably learnt' or 'NDTV in an exclusive interview has found'...or 'thanks to the exposure made by Times Now or NDTV or CNBC some action has been taken...' Each newspaper and channel is also a brand that has to compete hard to be in the news.

For both the 'media' and the 'public', there is a certain urgency which captures the restless spirit of the times. Research by advertising agencies shows that the maximum attention span of the audience is measured in seconds. In this scenario, 'politics' is essentially about events and person-ages, the more sensational the better. There is also a very clear break between mass politics and a new generation of political leaders whose style and approach are in sync with the media functionaries. Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh held in May 2007 were an interesting pointer. The media had been conducting various exit and opinion polls but the results belied the predictions of all political pundits. After her victory, the BSP leader Mayawati commented on TV that unlike others she had given no interviews since the media appeared to be busy and she did not want to 'disturb' them. The point she was making was that political leaders are more visible in the electronic media than in Parliament or public rallies.

It is in this context that one wonders about Thompson's claim that, 'whether they wish to or not, political leaders today must be prepared to adapt their activities to a new kind of visibility which works in new ways and on an altogether different scale. And they ignore this new visibility at their peril' (Thompson 1995: 120).

The former Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Somnath Chatterjee, was often seen pleading with the Members of Parliament (MPs) to behave themselves for they were being observed by the people at large, thanks to the live telecast of Parliamentary proceedings. Thompson's view seems to hold little ground in the Indian context where politicians have the benefit of this 'new visibility' with little at peril. The most obvious instance of this was the cash and vote scandal in Parliament in 2008 where MPs during the voting of the Indo-American Nuclear Bill upturned bags

full of money in full view of the national public to expose an alleged attempt to purchase support for the Bill. The Bill was passed, an enquiry instituted and no truth was found in the accusation. Such visibility, apart from eroding the already weak trust of the urban middle class in the political system, does not seem to act as a tangible deterrent.

In the period covered by the research for this article, there were two major events involving mass public participation that made the headlines, namely, the Gujjar agitation for inclusion as a Scheduled Tribe, and the sudden sectarian controversy in Punjab. Headlines with the term 'caste wars' accompanied by visuals of rampaging mobs breaking and burning interrupted for a brief while the routine of a media that seemed more comfortable with sound bites of politicians and the usual quota of glamour and 'page three' news.<sup>11</sup> The issues that these movements raised remain unresolved. Yet, they disappeared almost completely from the media with the cessation of rioting and killing.

The heightened visibility of political personnel to the public at large is also accompanied by a greater presence of the public, the *aam janata*. Many reality shows harp on the 'ordinary' background of the participants, that is, their marginal regional, ethnic or class background. People who in an earlier era could never have shared the stage with national-level celebrities, whether from politics or the film and music industry, actually do so. Indeed, at one point, the extension of representation to the ordinary in documentaries or social-realist films was a subversion and critique of mainstream media representations. The ordinary is now co-opted as a badge of professional authenticity, a sign of the proximity of the professionals, including stars and celebrities, to the vernacular and plebeian. This is one master strategy of containment in which class is simultaneously acknowledged and conjured away in one stroke: the ordinary is valued precisely because of its contrast with the elites (Wayne 2003).

I would like to argue that what the 'ordinary' is to the 'elite', the non-Western is to the Western. I do so to allow a more critical take on the considerable celebration of how Indian cuisine, fashion, clothes, films and music have made visible inroads in Western societies. As an illustrative example I take the case of Shilpa Shetty who won the Big Brother contest. Is this a victory for multiculturalism and cultural hybridity or for global India? Perhaps it is a bit of both. But what is more intriguing

<sup>11</sup> *TOI*, 30 May, 1 and 2 June 2007.

for me is precisely the use and appropriation of progressive ideas and movements within the corporate structure, yet another add-on to maximise profit. It is perhaps relevant therefore, to spend a few lines on the conscious diversity of the contestants in Big Brother:

[W]hile there is class, ethnic, gender and sexual diversity in the selection of the contestants, *this only becomes converted into elements of their media performance....* For the audience this social diversity works in a contradictory fashion. On the one hand it offers multiple points of identification, on the other, the text encourages the social or political basis for that identification to be converted into an individual's media performance. (Wayne 2003: 152, emphasis added)

The idea of a more 'inclusive and interactive public' has to be analysed along with the idea of fragmented audiences and the political implications of 'narrowcasting'. On the one hand, as is obvious, a great many new things are happening in the media. On the other hand, there is a curious repeat of what has already happened in the Western world a great many years ago. Commenting on the changing nature of the American media from the 1890s, a media scholar observed how the pressure to increase circulation led to 'genre of press attitudes and behaviour highlighting sensationalism and emotion-laden copy in pursuit of more and more readers' (Leighley 2004). I argue that in this process there is a broader emptying of the critical content of the 'political'.

### III

#### ***A reconfigured public sphere: The diaspora comes home and the desi<sup>12</sup> goes global***

Benedict Anderson's nationalism of the 'imagined community' that the print media helped construct at another time is being recast before our very eyes. A preconfigured idea of the 'national media' is difficult to sustain, both because of the globalisation of communication as well as the emergence of a transnational capitalist class. I want to push this argument further to emphasise that the increasingly influential media presence

<sup>12</sup> The global growth of what was seen as a regional film industry is an interesting example. See Avijit Ghosh, 'Bhojwood Dreams Big', *TOI*, 27 May 2007, p. 10.

of the Indian diaspora has to be placed in this context. Not all sections of the diaspora can vie for the kind of space given to steel tycoon Lakshmi Mittal or economist Lord Meghnad Desai. Patricia Uberoi was not just one of the earliest scholars in India to fully appreciate the importance of studying popular culture, but was perhaps also one of the first to note the significance of ‘the diaspora coming home’. While analysing two immensely popular Hindi films of the mid-1990s, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (DDLJ)* and *Pardes*, she argues that:

Indians ‘at home’ have had quite contradictory attitudes to their own diaspora. So long as the diaspora was constituted largely of the descendants of indentured labour in the ex-colonies, of farmers and lumberjacks in Canada, or—by the 1960s—of working class immigrants in Britain, the diaspora could be both out of sight and, mostly, out of mind. But with professional middle-class emigration in the 1970s and 1980s, and the Indian community’s attainment of a ‘model minority’ status in the North American context, the diaspora could no longer be ignored. Simultaneously, *a new role was discovered for emigrant Indians as patriotic investors in their country’s future.* (Uberoi 2006: 181, emphasis added)

Since both nationalism and capitalism are not quite what they used to be, the emigrant Indian does not necessarily act as a ‘patriotic investor’. Nor do the resident-Indian captains of industry speak the earlier nationalist language of protecting Indian industry and sovereign economic space. Instead, Indian capitalists are feted for buying up foreign corporations. Finance Minister Chidambaram made an interesting distinction between what he called an earlier era of organic development of capitalism where Indians built industries and the present stage, where they should buy up already established industries through global take overs.<sup>13</sup> Significant alliances are being forged between the resident and non-resident sections of the Indian transnational capitalist class.

*Delhi Times*, a supplement of *TOI*, carries a feature titled ‘India, the Land of Wealth Churners’. A cartoon of a prosperous-looking Indian man dressed in Western suit and tie, sitting cross legged, wearing a turban

<sup>13</sup> He was speaking at a function for presenting the Indian of the Year Award 2008, at the Taj Mansingh Hotel on 17 January 2008 (NDTV broadcasted this live).

and playing a snake charmer's flute, with a basket not of snakes but electronic cables, captures the reinvented global and corporate Indian. The accompanying text reads:

Indians have made a habit of featuring prominently in the list of high net worth individuals in the world today. If money makes the world go round, Indians are showing that they are adept at playing this game. ...Lord Swraj Paul features as the second richest Asian Briton with a net worth of \$750 million. In the list of billionaires released by Forbes in March, India had the biggest contingent of billionaires from Asia. In doing so, India's 36 billionaires pipped Japan's 24 to the post.

Lord Meghnad Desai, who is also a celebrated economist says,

I would say Indians now offer to the world a heady mix of wealth and intellect. India is a land from where the wealth churners come. Global Indian takeovers have not gone unnoticed by those who are sitting in different time zones. We are not only creating wealth here, we are also tremendously chipping in with the welfare and development of these developed countries.<sup>14</sup>

The diaspora appears both in full-fledged write-ups as well as news reports like 'British curry fix just got spicier', about the British firm ABF acquiring Indian food brand Patak's.<sup>15</sup> It appears on television like the IIFA Awards event in Yorkshire where Bollywood personalities were present in large numbers. And the greatest applause was for Bollywood actor Upen Patel, a British Indian who thanked all British Indians and hailed the United Kingdom.<sup>16</sup> Being Indian acquires new meanings as presumed notions about the coterminous nature of culture and territory are challenged.

The shift away from an essentialist to a contingent idea of culture has been a welcome development. However, this delinking of culture and nation from the territorial and political may not have the same implications

<sup>14</sup> *Times Business TOI*, 31 May 2007.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> IIFA Awards aired on Star TV, 20 May 2008.

in all situations. It may mean that in a multicultural USA, Diwali is celebrated in the White House. It may mean that the Indian media can now take up some of the difficulties that the Indian diaspora faces. For instance, when British immigration minister Liam Byrne ruled out any change to the controversially-amended Highly-skilled Migrant Programme, *TOI* carried a report on 'disenfranchised Indians in UK'.<sup>17</sup>

*Sunday Times (TOI)* actually has a regular column 'Indiaspora' by Chidanand Rajghatta who is based in Washington. He has an interesting report on the immigration debate in the US which highlights what Patricia Uberoi described as the 'contradictory attitude' of Indians towards the diaspora: one for the affluent 'model minority' of USA, and a quite different one for the working class emigrants elsewhere.

The fate of tens of thousands of high-skilled Indian professionals waiting to be permanent US residents is being sidelined in an immigration debate that is heavily tilted in favour of illegal workers, according to advocates of high-tech immigration and Indian activists.

...Despite the support of US high-tech companies such as Microsoft and Cisco, and business-industry lobbying groups, the ongoing debate centres mainly on the 12 million mostly illegal immigrants, who, under the new proposals being mooted, will jump ahead of high-skilled Indians and qualify to become US citizens.

'What's being debated here is a pro-illegal worker, anti-skilled professional Bill,' says Aman Kapoor, co-founder of the advocacy group Immigration Voice.

...According to Kapoor and others, some of the new rules being considered will be heartbreaking for skilled Indian professionals.....

...What this country is saying is that it prefers cherry pickers to high-skilled work force, not that I have anything against cherry pickers, he said.<sup>18</sup>

Some Asian Indian Americans have sought to link themselves to the first working class migrants who came to the west coast in the early 1900s, with whom they have little in common. On the other hand, the

<sup>17</sup> Rashmee Roshan Lall, 'No Respite for Disenfranchised Indian in UK', *TOI*, 30 May 2007, p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> *TOI*, 25 May 2007, p. 11.

same group was also rewarded with higher rates of interest for investments in India (Chaudhuri 1998: 196). The argument I am making here is that the transnational Indian middle class defines its 'national' interest almost exclusively in terms of its class interests, regardless of the state or nation concerned. The idea of India becomes almost entirely cultural, and excludes the political ideas that seemed so central to the making of a modern and free India. While the modern nation was always a class project, it was not permissible to speak of it as though it belonged solely to the capitalists and the middle classes.

In another of his columns, Chidanand Rajghatta writes:

Typically, jokes about Indians now center around outsourcing and tech-support, in which they come out as smart-assy, if accented brainiacs.

...All in good spirit, of course. In fact, Indians are now providing so much material for humour that half a dozen Indian-American comedians are milking it till it moos. One such came on stage recently and told his mostly White audience, 'I know what you guys are thinking...isn't there any job a guy from India wouldn't steal? Hey, I'm just doing this stand-up act so that I can avoid being a doctor or an engineer'.<sup>19</sup>

It is not just diasporic Bollywood actors such as Upen Patel and resident-Indian Shilpa Shetty (whose appearance in the reality TV show 'Celebrity Big Brother' made her an international star) who are visible in the Indian media.<sup>20</sup> Significantly, diasporic Indians in Western films also find space, such as the 'Desi Diva' Sheetal Seth, the original ABCD, known for her role as the 'tempestuous Nina', who struggled to find her identity in the film 'American Born Confused Desi'.<sup>21</sup> This is significant for the broader argument about the emergence of a global middle class of resident and non-resident Indians (NRIs) whose 'national' interest and imaginary will necessarily be different.

<sup>19</sup> Chidanand Rajghatta, 'Indians now Face a Green Card Gridlock: Professionals Lose out to Illegal Immigrants', *TOI*, 10 June 2007 and 'Immigrant Swansong', *TOI*, 10 June 2007, p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> *TOI*, 25 May 2007, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> *TOI*, 2 June 2007.

#### IV

### *Explicit ideology and everyday corporate speak in the media*

My central argument has been that the media has been both extraordinarily visible and self-conscious in redefining the public discourse of India. Key to this recasting has been the construction of a new global Brand India. This has been done in two ways: by an overt ideological celebration of the market and an undermining of the welfare state, and a more covert transformation of public discourse through its assortment of features, stories, reports, news, gossip and advertisements. Common to both is the new interactive approach and the representation of the 'ordinary' and the 'diverse'. I touch upon the media's self-articulated role for itself, address the instances of overt ideological campaigns and then move on to the quotidian features that help in the recasting.

The centrality accorded to the ideological role of the media goes against two influential arguments in media studies because it often assumes that people are passive victims—rather than autonomous agents who often read against the grain of the text—and reduces the complex working of society to a conspiracy (Liebes and Katz 1993).<sup>22</sup> I disagree with this view because while readings may vary, the broad parameters within which they are expressed and debated are laid down. And more importantly, some issues are rendered invisible. It would be rash to set aside the fact that the media industry is located within the complex of corporate capitalism, and that serious business interests are at stake.

The media appears to be engaged in a brazen projection of its own role as some kind of knight in armour at the forefront of civil society, its last hope since the three organs of the state, the executive, legislature and judiciary have failed the system. This includes voicing the apparent disenchantment of the 'public' with the government and, more broadly, with political parties and politicians. An interesting instance of running down state welfare measures is evident in the report titled 'Why Some People Want to be Poor':

The perks of being Below the Poverty Line is making some people do desperate things, like demolish their toilets, to achieve the status.... Reports from Bihar where a minister and even the dead have managed

<sup>22</sup> I have discussed this issue at greater length in Chaudhuri (2005b).

to get under the magic line.... So valuable is the BPL status that all across impoverished, lawless Bihar, there is a craze to be on the poverty list.... Influential landlords managed to get their names on the BPL list by showing poor people's huts as their own.<sup>23</sup>

This is a good instance of how discourses render some kind of policy measures illegitimate. This is in keeping with the fact that 'society... requires discourse (the mapping, description and articulation of situations and processes) which by definition has the effect of annihilating and delegitimising certain views and positions while including others' (Zoonen 1994: 40).

Yet another instance that highlights the media's self-appointed role of the only institution upon which the nation can trust pertains to a sting operation by NDTV on what is widely described as the BMW case (29 May 2007). The case pertains to the mowing down of a number of people by a BMW car driven by rich young revellers returning from a party. The lone witness who had not turned hostile, a man named Kulkarni, gave NDTV the sting tapes showing both the defence and prosecution lawyers offering him money. However, Kulkarni himself has repeatedly changed his statements.<sup>24</sup> Indeed in many such instances like the well known Jessica Lal case (where a well-known model and woman bartender was murdered), the media did help in bringing punishment to the guilty. At the same time a tendency of trial by the media has also led to very unfortunate and dangerous trends. To mention one instance, a woman teacher was lynched by parents and then summarily sacked by the school authorities, thanks to a fraudulent sting operation that suggested that she used her students to run a sex business. No action was taken against the media.

I move now to a rather dramatic case of overt ideological engagement that erupted in the media over a rather innocuous remark by the Prime Minister to corporate India. He suggested that corporations ought to avoid paying large salaries to their CEOs and also move away from a culture of ostentatious display. The front page news of *TOI*, reports the Prime Minister's speech thus:<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Mohammed Wajihudin, 'Why Some People want to be Poor', *TOI*, 27 May 2007, p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> 'Fresh Sting Tapes Entangle Kulkarni', *TOI*, 2 June 2007, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> This was a theme that the *Hindustan Times (HT)* also took up in a major way (See Karan Thapar, 'Pertie and the Prime Minister', *Sunday Sentiments, HT*, 3 June 2007).

In a prescription to industry that is bound to cause a flutter in Corporate India, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Thursday asked big companies to ‘resist’ paying large salaries to their top executives as rising ‘inequities’ between haves and have-nots could lead to social unrest. In his speech to CII, PM proposed *an unusual model of austerity* to his corporate audience, suggesting that ‘industry needs to be moderate in emolument levels’ as higher salaries, unless matched by rising incomes ‘across the nation’, would stoke disaffection among those outside of the growth parabola. ...The PM’s formulation may well have taken his audience by surprise as Singh has always praised India’s growth story, lauding first-generation entrepreneurs. ...Restrained consumption the PM suggested, would help diffuse the resentment of those still feeding off crumbs and not the growth cake itself. But Singh’s remarks were clearly out of sync with his own model—the one he initiated as finance minister in 1991—which laid stress on unshackling individual enterprise to encourage wealth creation. ...<sup>26</sup>

Apart from the front page report, *TOI* also comments on this in its lead editorial:

...Tilting at the windmills of ‘conspicuous consumption’ and ‘profit maximisation’ might have worked magic at political rallies in the 1960s, but isn’t the appropriate noise to make at a CII meet in 2007. Lavish weddings don’t lead to poverty, and Indians know by now that the most profligate and wasteful institution around is the government. ....Part of Manmohan’s thesis was that the rich ought to restrain their consumption so as not to excite envy among the poor. But that poverty owes, in the first place, to the abject failure of the government’s policies and welfare programmes. Policy should be designed to raise incomes for the poor, not to cap CEO salaries. In order to generate wealth by being globally competitive Indian companies need the best CEOs they can find, for which globally competitive salaries and perks will have to be offered.... The more the rich consume, the more it’s possible to tax them and create resources to help the poor reversed... The prime minister is an accomplished economist, and this line of reasoning shouldn’t be strange to him. All the more unfortunate that

<sup>26</sup> ‘Cutting Kake with Karan’, *Delhi Times, TOI*, 25 May 2007, p. 1.

he chose to rehash the old political wisdom of the establishment, which turned India into the sick man of Asia in the years since Independence.<sup>27</sup>

On the same day, *TOI* carries a piece titled 'PM's advice on pay cut likely to go unheeded':

PM's advice to corporations to crimp salaries as a tool to ensure that the growth process ...is at best, an appeal to the conscience. The opening of the economy and the spread of capitalism in India, as in nations like the US, doesn't really leave government power to influence corporate incomes.

The advice to cut back salaries suffers from another flaw. It's in contradiction to the widely-celebrated return of NRIs and the 'reverse brain drain' which has come about only when opportunities and incomes in India began to appear attractive....<sup>28</sup>

Clearly, an overt ideological campaign is at work here. The government is run down, the diaspora heralded, corporations felicitated and a model of economic development prescribed. *TOI* covers this the following day too. The headline reads 'India Inc says no to CEO salary curbs' and goes on to state: 'The Prime Minister's call to India Inc to trim salaries of top executives has got a thumbs down from industry' Sunil Bharti Mittal the just elected head of the corporate club, the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) states that 'Salaries cannot be legislated',<sup>29</sup> Swaminathan Anklesaria Aiyar wonders whether the PM would 'extend this same principle to the political sector', and demand of them avoidance of conspicuous consumption.<sup>30</sup> Two weeks later, Shobhaa De returns to the issue:

Chill out, Manmohanji. What is all this pathshala Principal-style lecture baaji about India Inc cutting back on the cheeni. Where would Bharat be without its Fat Cats-yes, the very guys you are scolding? ...Every one of those fat cats you want to put on the treadmill for some

<sup>27</sup> *TOI*, 25 May 2007, p. 22.

<sup>28</sup> *TOI*, 25 May 2007, p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> 'Pay Check: Capping CEO Salaries will Shackle Private Enterprise', *TOI*, 26 May 2007, pp. 1, 22.

<sup>30</sup> Swaminathan Anklesaria Aiyar, 'Ten Commandments for Dr. Singh', *Sunday Times*, *TOI*, 10 June 2007, p. 24.

enforced tightening, are busy taking over rival international giants and clawing their way on to the top... Recent reports talked about a staggering 44 crore 'package' offered to four sharp finance managers, just to quit their cushy jobs in Singapore and come home.....When one considers the goodies enjoyed by netas of all hues (including those with criminal records), the legitimate salaries earned by key professionals who deliver the goods can hardly stand comparison. Also, a CEO can be fired. Who fires netas? CEOs are accountable to their bosses and more so, to share holders Netas report to nobody...<sup>31</sup>

The themes remain the same. The CEO's accountability is seen as the model to be emulated while the wider understanding of the democratic accountability of the state to its citizens is given short shrift. This ideological offensive sounds a bit over the top in the light of the global meltdown in 2008, the incredible bailing out of bankrupt corporations and our own fraud by Satyam, at one time an iconic IT corporation of India.

Full blown debates on models of development as that generated by the PM's speech are not as common as the overwhelming presence of corporate news and views. The latter are woven through the media and far more difficult to identify as tangible ideological elements. I argue that it is these that transform the content of the media and thereby of public discourse. And here sponsors lay down the rules. Even as I come to the end of my month-long scrutiny of *TOI*, I find its 25th June issue with a blank front page containing only a blue twelve inch square with the line 'Now imagine 1,121 lacs' below. And in small print 'Please refer to page 2'. Page 2 carries full page advert of the Housing Development and Infrastructure Development (HDIL) corporation.

But it is not just advertisements that I am referring to. As Raymond Williams stated decades ago, paid advertisements are old fashioned; the real thing is corporate coverage obtained through normal news reporting. My survey of the English print media since the early 1990s has shown that it is not only ads that grew dramatically, but also news features on subjects like ads, sales and market strategies (Chaudhuri 2000). Regular corporate market studies are reported in the newspapers. I quote from just a few from the many that appeared in the *TOI* during the period of my study. One is a study by a global market intelligence firm, iSuppli:

<sup>31</sup> Shobhaa De, 'Politically Incorrect: Cheeni Kum', *Sunday Times, TOI*, 10 June 2007, p. 24.

All those who think China will drive the future TV market need to think again for India is fast emerging as a key driver in the global TV market both as a consumer and manufacturer of TV sets. In a country where nearly 70 per cent of people earn less than \$5,000 a year, the nation has shown remarkable interest in buying TVs. And this includes even the expensive flat-panel TVs, which too are moving off the shelf faster than before. ...This was revealed by iSuppli a global market intelligence firm in its recent study.<sup>32</sup>

A new study titled 'Country of Consumers' by McKinsey Global Institute reports that Indians are already spending big. But the next 20 years will see them spending bigger. A new upwardly mobile middle class will be responsible for reshaping global consumer markets. The study categorises the new emerging classes as the deprived, aspirers, seekers, strivers and Global Indians. It observes:

That India is passing through exciting times is known. What is not known is that major unprecedented changes are underway, especially in India's growing middle class. The economic growth will reshape the lifestyle of Indian families and within two decades, India will be a nation of upwardly mobile middle class, says a new study by McKinsey Global Institute (MGI).<sup>33</sup>

The rhetoric of Global Brand India clearly dominates the media discourse. The nation is surely being reinvented. The media is central in this transformation of the 'public'. The most challenging part of this transformation is its apparent democratising of form and content that conceal the hollowing out of a more critical public discourse.

## VI *Epilogue*

This article was based on studying the media for one month in the summer of 2007. Mid-2008 saw the collapse of Lehman Brothers that heralded the global economic meltdown and intruded unexpectedly into the

<sup>32</sup> Sujata Dutta Sachdeva, 'India Emerges Key Driver of Global Television Market'. *Times Business, TOI*, 28 May 2007.

<sup>33</sup> 'Country of Consumers', *TOI*, 27 May 2007, p. 22.

unabashed celebration of corporate capitalism by the media. On 26 November 2008, terrorists struck Mumbai and we had a minute by minute, often hysterical, coverage by the media even as the killings were on. A great deal of discussion followed about the role of Indian media. Some attacked it for its over the top jingoism, others for endangering the lives of people still hostage, yet others for its obsession with the rich and famous under attack in the Taj and Oberoi Hotel while the people killed at the erstwhile VT (now Chhatrapati Shivaji) station were given a miss. All the while the channels were engaged in an unseemly competition with their 'breaking news' of the ongoing tragedy. The media then took on the role of awakening the nation. Channels invited celebrities who took over the mantle of the public, the voice of the nation and announced that 'enough is enough'. On *Times Now* two days after the event, Suhel Seth, well known in the public relations and ad world, advocated sacking all politicians (the 'jokers') and replacing them with CEOs who would know how to be accountable to the public. That many of these 'jokers' did not share the same social background as the older urban middle class is another well-known story of Indian public life. The shrill media rhetoric that followed the attack resonated with the themes that are part of the newly dominant rhetoric. The government and politicians are run down, and corporate professionals are seen as the saviours who will create an efficient and global nation.

The key contention of this article has been that Indian liberalisation has changed the idea of the 'public' in many ways and the media has been a central agent of this transformation. I have sought to understand this shift in terms of the changed form of global capitalism and the nature of the ascendant capitalist class, the transnational capitalist class. I have argued that new cultural forms are constitutive of the reinvented political and economic order. In the fitness of things, we now have the rise of a new set of public personages who fit the bill better, like the ones that Thompson wrote of, who interact with the public through blogs and emails. But unlike Thompson's 'transformed public', they connect only with some. A recent cover page story 'Pop Goes the Icon' is worth a careful read.

...we seem to be finally witnessing the rise of a 'poster boy politician' cult. These young political representatives are icons of popular

culture...There's a generational shift in politics and there are regular well-educated guys you can idolise. They are just like any other professionals—they work hard and at times even party hard...[a PR executive]...says she hopes they get featured in commercials.... In an age of what you see is what you get, the 30-something pin-up netas are grabbing eyeballs with their suave looks and impeccable sound bytes. Being savvy is what sells.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Times Life*, TOI, 25 January 2009.

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