

The effect of sting operations on TRP ratings of news channels

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Abstract:

"A Sting Operation is an operation designed to catch a person committing a crime by means of deception. A complicated confidence game planned and executed with great care. The word "sting" derives its origin from American usage to mean a police undercover operation designed to ensnare criminals. The word "sting" is a synonym for the expression "set a trap to catch a crook" and this article uses the term in that sense. In more refined terms, it can be called Investigative Journalism or Undercover Journalism". Sting Operation is an information-gathering exercise; it looks for facts that are not easy to obtain by simple requests and searches, or those that are actively being concealed, suppressed or distorted. An informed citizenry the bedrock of a democracy, holding the government accountable through voting and participation requires investigative journalism which cannot sustain itself on asymmetric dissemination of information. Television news is an evolving medium and has definitely moved away from being just about straight news. With more than fifty news channels at our disposal, the competition seems to be sizzling. We are living in the times of Page 3 journalism, where sizzle sells and 'breaking news' at any cost seems to be the mantra to get an edge over the competition. Sting operations of different sorts seem to be on the agenda of many news channels. In recent times, sting operation or any form of investigative journalism is drawn by the fact that news channels can have greater TRPs that is, an edge over other news channels in this age of channel wars.

Introduction:

There are numerous fallouts of sting operations conducted by the media. Social, political, cultural, ethical and professional effects of sting operations are not speculations. These effects are visible in the changed TRP ratings, sales & circulation figures, readership, listenership and viewership profiles and advertising revenue collections.

The questions raised to prove the justification of carrying out these operations are on moral policing, credibility and profit making exercises. Why the age old form of investigative journalism was not found sufficient in today's media dominated society in India?

"There are awful things that happen in the world, and I don't believe people should be prevented from seeing them" Paul Lester, a Professor of California State University told the American Journalism Review.

Being adopted in all the three forms of media, sting operations and their justification are a major issue of discussion in the Indian society. What shook the nation in the form of Tehelka.com's expose of politicians and bureaucrats has come to stay as a form of journalism in our country.

Investigative journalism : avenger of the wronged, illuminator of the corrupt, expose of the past, analyst of the present, harbinger of the future, conscience of those governing and consciousness of those governed.

In many cases, the subjects of the reporting wish the matters un-

der scrutiny to remain undisclosed. Among the most popular programmes in India, are those reporting on corruption and misdeeds of politicians and government officials? 'Candid camera', reports many true stories of the day the bribe that the police inspector extracts from the victim of a crime before agreeing to investigate, the 'fee' that the government officer charges for his giving the order to make an electric connection, and the 'contribution' that a company pays a member of Parliament before bringing up a legislative concern in the Lok Sabha. Because of all these things do we really require Sting Operations? At the same time, where such investigative work involves the use of covert methods, it raises issues that tend to further blur the line between law and ethics. Is deception legitimate when the aim is to tell the truth? Is any method justifiable no matter the working conditions and the difficulties in getting information? Can television reporters use hidden cameras to get a story? Can journalists use false identities to gain access to information? The critical question that surfaces is "to what extent can the media go and to what extent should a person be informed?"

Types of Sting Operation:

Sting Operations are undertaken with a view to look into the working of the govt. or to see whether the acts of any individual is against the public order. On the basis of the purpose Sting Operations can be classified as positive and negative. Positive Sting Operation is one which results in the interest of the society, which pierces the veils of the working of the government. It is carried out in the public interest. Due to positive sting operation society is benefited because it makes government responsible and accountable. It leads to the transparency in the government. On the other hand negative sting operations do not benefit the society, but they do harm the society and its individuals. It unnecessarily violates the privacy of the individual without any beneficial results to the society. These types of Sting operations if allowed then it will hamper the freedom of the individuals and restricts their rights. Here are some examples which we can distinguish as positive and negative sting operations.

1. Positive Sting Operations: Sting operations on ultra-sound centers carried out by the Health officers in Karnataka for "serious enforcement" of the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act which bans sex determination of fetuses and consequent abortion of female ones to stop female foeticide.

- The Ministry (by the Cable Television Networks Regulation Act and Programme Code), has prohibited the transmission of Cineworld channel for 30 days for showing "objectionable content." Because it "offended good taste and decency" and it "was obscene and likely to corrupt public morality and was not suited for unrestricted public exhibition"
- An operation by an online news site called Tehelka to catch top politicians and army officers taking bribes from journalists posing as businessmen.
- An operation in which a journalist posing as a struggling actress met actor Shakti Kapoor, who promised in the televised footage that his secretary would introduce her to movie producers and directors.

2. Negative Sting Operations: Instances over the years have shown that though sting operations do expose corruption in some cases, sometimes they seriously violate the rules of journalism in the pursuit of profit and short-term sensationalism.

- The Delhi High Court on Friday, 7th September, 2007, issued notices to the Delhi government and city police after taking suo motu cognizance of media reports alleging that a sting operation carried out by a TV channel, which claimed to have exposed a sex racket run by a government school teacher Uma Khurana, for allegedly luring her pupils into prostitution has now been revealed to be completely fabricated and was fake and distorted.
- The Supreme Court on Wednesday, 7th February, 2007, issued notices to a private news channel and its reporter for carrying out a sting operation carried out in the year 2004, which allegedly showed a non-bail able warrant could be procured against any person by paying a hefty amount in the court.
- These incidents are an example of how a sting operation can go wrong and become an exercise in trapping an innocent person. India TV's chief editor, Rajat Sharma, said that there was no violation of privacy in exposing such matters as political corruption or the trading of jobs for sex in Bollywood, a practice known in movie and theatrical business lore as the casting couch. "If you are serious about exposing certain social evils, there is no other option but to use sting operations."

Review of Literature:

1. Programmes on sting operations conducted by Star News, Zee News, India TV, and Aaj Tak, available on the YouTube and www.google.com.
 2. All these programmes were a part of news bulletins on prime time and some were news analysis conducted with comments by experts.
 3. Datewise coverage of these programmes was available with the channel archives and lists the number of times these programmes were repeated on the day of the telecast of the sting, in the week of breaking of the operation, in the month of the original telecast and a follow up story in the months to come.
 4. TRP ratings chart were taken from the individual channels on condition of anonymity for these weeks under study. Also ratings of the channels starting from three weeks prior and three weeks after the telecast were taken.
 5. The Hindu: Saturday, Apr02, 2005
Sting operations for TRPs? (SREEDHAR PILLAI)
STAR ONE, Star Utsav, Zoom TV, India TV, Travel & Living... the list of channels launched last year goes on. They are all competing with one another to make their presence felt in the Hindi television market, which is controlled by the big four — Star Plus, Sony, Zee and Aaj Tak.
- The list is likely to grow what with new channels on the anvil. In this scenario, how does a new channel survive?
Some of them like India TV, controlled by Rajat Sharma, are trying to create a sensation by having a special programme on the Bollywood casting couch.

Suhaib Ilyasi and the little known India TV hogged the headlines with their sting operation on Bollywood stars Shakti Kapoor and TV star Aman Varma.

6. DNA: Thursday, April 8, 2010

Sting operation: Whom does it hurt? (Antara Dev Sen)

On the other hand, it is the job of journalists to inform the public. Investigative journalism has for ages used both overt and covert ways of getting information, of which the sting operation is only the most recent and most dramatic. A healthy democracy is built on informed choice and exposing corruption in public life is essential for accountability in public life.

Persecuting those who try to expose corruption stinks of an incorrigibly corrupt, closed society. Clamping down on media stings flouts democratic freedoms and is a way of silencing the press.

But the media needs to be responsible, too. The important point is not the sensational material that the hidden camera reveals, but two basic questions. One, who benefits from the sting? Is it really in the public interest? And two, who is hurt by this sting? Was this deception and invasion of privacy necessary for the public good? Sadly, the callous so-called stings that harp on sex and sleaze and increase TRPs are ignored by the mighty wings of the state. And stings that go after corrupt officials who rob citizens and use public office for personal profit are being targeted by the CBI.

7. Indian Express.com: Sobhana K Tags, Sat Dec 27 2008,

Not just for TRPs, sting good for anti-corruption cell too

The department has cracked 74 cases with sting operations and arrested 74 people

Television news channels might have drawn flak for hasty sting operations, but the method has yielded a good harvest for the Delhi Government's anti-corruption branch, which has cracked 30 cases with sting operations, leading to the arrest of 74 people.

The big breaks were the arrest of the Motor Licensing Officer in Ashok Vihar Transport Authority, the Labour Welfare Commissioner, Delhi Police inspectors, and NDMC and MCD officials and engineers.

The 50-year-old department started using the method only a year ago after Additional Commissioner N Dilip Kumar took charge.

"Initially on basis of complaints and by laying traps people were arrested, but often these complaints were motivated and many were false. So we decided to carry out sting operations," Kumar said

8. The Sunday Indian : September 23, 2007

Anything, for TRPs: SAURABH KUMAR SHAHI

It was well past nine in the morning that day, but the newsroom of the little known channel, India Live, was still bustling with reporters. Several reporters who had completed their shift were still glued to the TV set. The top brass was visibly happy. They were quite sure that this particular sting operation would change the fortunes of the channel forever. They were confident that now they would be able to make their presence felt in the rat race of Television Rating Points (TRPs). The CEO was trying to gauge the impact of the operation by regularly taking feedback from the newsroom about how many calls were coming in and whether any

other news channels had picked up the lead from this sting. After two hours, it became clear that somehow the news had not made its intended impact. In short, nobody seemed to notice.

Ravish Kumar, a senior journalist, claims that stings are an essential element of journalism, but they should be done in the larger interest of people. He says, No politician will ever accept voluntarily that he has taken a bribe. The only way out is a sting operation. It is a good tool to expose corruption. In fact, paranoid officials now think twice before asking for a bribe. But contrary to what Kumar thinks, things are not as simple. For certain reporters fresh out of journalism classes, stings are more of a tool to satisfy personal ambition. They are viewed as a shortcut to glamour and fame. Sting operation experts earn fat salaries. In short, such ops bring both fame and fortune in one goes. Naturally, the temptation is hard to resist.

9. Business Standard: Wednesday - Mar 30, 2005

Sting ops make big business sense

All of a sudden, sting operations are 'hot' business for television news channels. India TV's recent spycam operation on actors Shakti Kapoor and Aman Verma ensured that the channel and its promoter Rajat Sharma get talked about.

A feat India TV could not achieve in nine months of its operation. Till the time of going to press TAM had not released last week's channel share figures -- but media experts say India TV's marketshare is expected to touch 10 per cent, compared to 5 per cent three weeks back.

So do news channels conduct sting operations with an eye on television rating points, hence, profits?

Channel executives would have you believe that sting operations are more of a crusade against crime.

"Zee wants to work in public interest. We believe in doing sting operations for the benefit of the masses," says Alka Saxena of Zee News.

Profit is not an issue as the 'expose' cannot be promoted or advertised since it has to be kept secret, she claims. "The channel, in fact, loses money in paying bribes. At times our gadgets are taken away by the investigating agency," she adds. Agrees BAG Films' Ajit Anjum "The motive behind these sting operations is not profits but the excitement to expose corruption." He, however, agrees that such programmes tend to boost the TRPs as the moment "recorded by a hidden camera" flashes on the screen, the viewer gets attentive.

BAG Films makes Red Alert for Star News for which it did a sting operation.

Invariably, higher TRP ratings translate into profits that accrue from advertisements. Devender Rawat, director of Sunrise Advertising Pvt Ltd, the agency that deals in local brands, says that India TV charged only Rs 500 per 10 seconds till about a week back.

Statement of Problem:

In recent times, most of the television news channels conduct

and broadcast sting operations every day. TV journalist takes a hidden camera with him and broadcasts countrywide bulletins of responsible people accepting bribes. These effects are visible in the changed TRP ratings and advertising revenue collections. The questions raised to prove the justification of carrying out these operations are on moral policing, credibility and profit making exercises..

Objectives:

- To elaborate the sting operations conducted by Television Hindi news channels.
- To study the effect of sting operations on TRPs of channels

Universe:

The sample selected were Hindi news channels Aaj Tak, NDTV, Star News, India News, Live India and Zee News .

Unit of research:

My research units are the sting operations conducted by Television Hindi news channels (Aaj Tak, NDTV, Star News, India News, Live India and Zee News).

Methodology:

The research methodology will be data collection and data analysis appropriate for the chosen methodology. Data collection has been done by sample survey and case study.

Area of research & sampling design:

The sample selected was from Delhi and NCR Regions and Various sting operations conducted by Television Hindi News Channels.

- ☐ Samples are people living in Delhi and NCR.
- ☐ The total sample size is 350.
- ☐ The sample choice has been done on the following variables- age group, profession, sex, geography, academic qualifications.
- ☐ As per age group the sample is of four types between 15-20, 21-35, 36-50 and 50 onwards.
- ☐ As per profession the categories chosen were Doctors, Engineers, Media Persons from Print & Electronic Media, Media Teachers, Managers, Government Employees, and Business Men & Media Students.
- ☐ As per sex male and female.
- ☐ As per geography the areas from where sample was collected were East Delhi and Ghaziabad, NOIDA and Greater NOIDA, North Delhi, West Delhi, South Delhi, Gurgaon and Faridabad.
- ☐ As per academic qualifications the categories are school students, undergraduates, post graduates, professionally qualified.

Sampling techniques:

There are two types of data which have been collected – primary and secondary.

Primary data was collected by the following techniques

- ☐ Watching the sting operations on television news channels
- ☐ Sample survey
- ☐ Questionnaire

Secondary data was collected by the following techniques

- ☐ Websites
- ☐ Seminar papers

Case Studies:**India TV (Casting Couch):**

The channel was launched on May 20, 2004 by Rajat Sharma and wife Ritu Dhawan. The channel is the flagship service of Independent News Service, which was co-founded by Sharma and Dhawan in 1998. Prior to launching India TV, Sharma was a known face on Indian television since 1992, having previously been the anchor of Aap Ki Adalat on Zee TV and Janata Ki Adalat on Star TV.

India TV undertook a sting operation on the casting couch phenomenon in the Indian film industry. For this it targeted at the famous film actor Shakti Kapoor and TV actor Aman Verma. When a journalist posing as a struggling actress met Shakti Kapoor, a seasoned actor, he promised in the televised footage that his secretary would introduce her to movie producers and directors. But there was a quid pro quo.

"Come, don't be shy," Kapoor, who often plays the bad guy in movies, told the journalist in her dimly lit Bombay hotel room. "I want to make love to you." When she hesitated, he implied that it was common practice and named three reigning Bollywood actresses who he said had slept with movie directors to get to the top.

On another episode shown four days after the expose on Kapoor, the same journalist met Aman Verma, a popular actor in TV soap operas and on a singing competition that resembles that U.S. show "American Idol." After some banter, which includes the woman saying, "hope you won't be naughty," he is shown leading her to his bedroom. According to TV India, he stopped at the bathroom and she took the opportunity to open the front door of the apartment, where a camera crew was waiting. They barged inside and demanded comment.

"These are the basic facts of life. This is what people do in the industry," a shocked Verma tells the camera. "In a way, I am trying to scare her off." Later he is shown breaking down and falling at the feet of the producer. "Bollywood's widest-known family secret is out in the public glare now," said Mahesh Bhatt, a filmmaker.

This can be explained by the viewership India TV got after Sting operations on celebrities, etc:

From being the fifth most-watched Hindi news channel, India TV leapfrogged to the first spot the day it telecast its sting operation involving Bollywood actor Shakti Kapoor. That day, it managed to garner a share of 22.4 per cent among Hindi news channels, beating Aaj Tak (20.2 per cent), NDTV India (18 per cent), Star News (14 per cent) and Zee News (13.4 per cent).

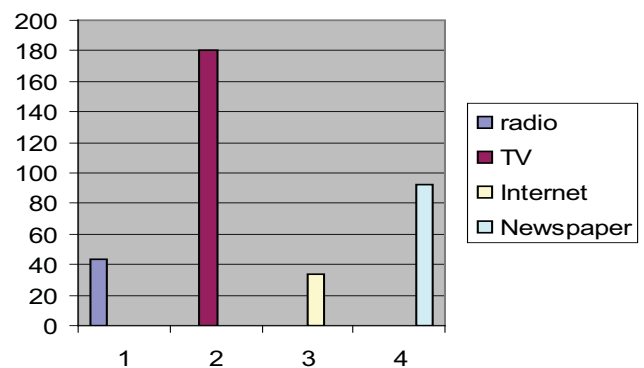
Data provided by TAM indicated that its relative success continued through the week. India TV, promoted by Mr. Rajat Sharma, had a viewership share of 11.5 per cent for that whole week. It had barely a 7 per cent share the previous week.

However the channel was back at its fifth position for the entire week. Aaj Tak (with 22.9 per cent), NDTV (19.8 per cent) and

Star (17 per cent) were the top three.

Observation & Conceptual Analysis of Survey Data:**Q.1 Which media do you prefer for news?**

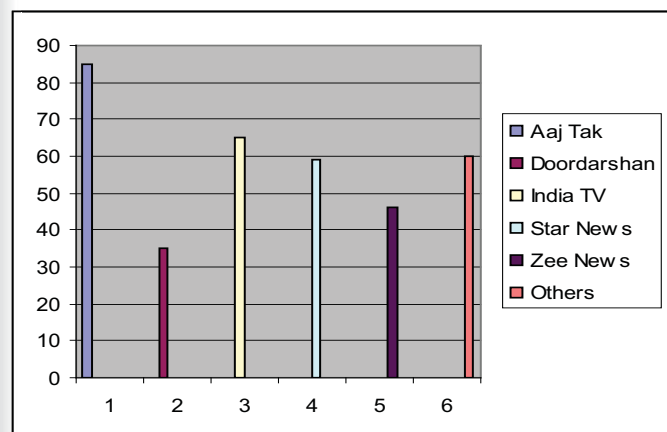
	Male	Female	Grand Total
Radio	24	20	44
Television	80	100	180
Internet	24	10	34
Newspaper	80	12	92



• The most popular choice of media for majority of the audience is television.

Q.2 Which news channel do you prefer?

	Male	Female	Grand Total
Aaj Tak	24	10	85
Doordarshan	20	15	35
India TV	24	20	65
Star News	30	35	59
Zee News	15	21	46
Others	40	20	60

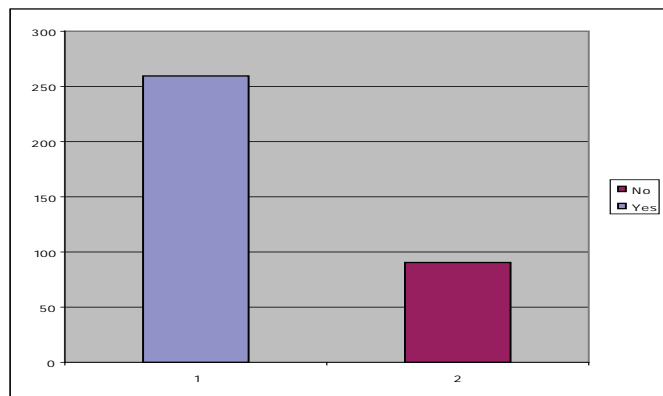


• The first divide in the choice of the news channel is between government and non-government employees. But the news

channel most seen by the audience is Aaj Tak.

Q.3 Are you aware of sting operations being carried out by different news channels?

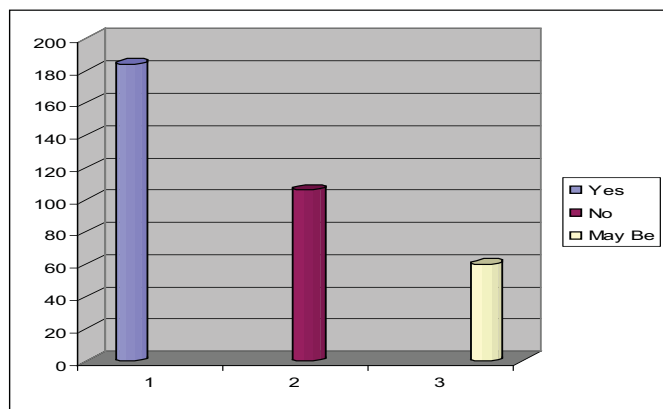
	Male	Female	Grand Total
Yes	164	96	260
No	56	34	90



• It is evident that the knowledge of sting operations in India is good in the audience. They have heard of most of the sting operations and have seen them on the television.

Q.4 Was Shakti Kapoor's sting operation by India TV a gateway into the concept of sting operations?

	Male	Female	Grand Total
Yes	164	20	184
No	56	50	106
May Be	50	10	60

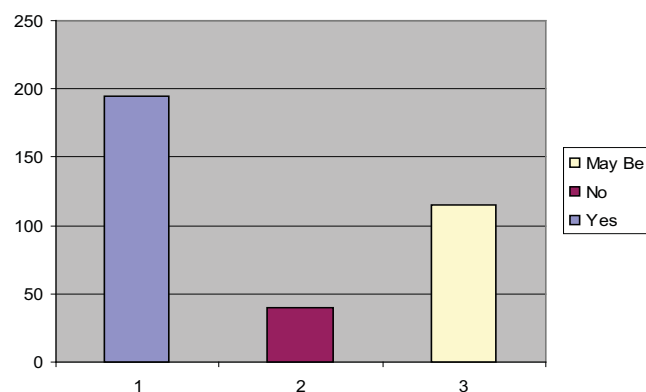


• Most of the audiences are aware of sting operations being carried out by different news channels.

Q.5 Do you think these are merely a stunt by these news channels to raise TRPs and websites to sell?

	Male	Female	Grand Total
Yes	101	94	195
No	25	15	40

May Be	60	45	115
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• Audience is divided over the aim of the channels to conduct sting operations. Majority feel that it is a stunt by the channels to raise their TRPs.

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