

FIRST PILLAR vs FOURTH PILLAR

A study of press coverage of Delhi Legislative Assembly

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Introduction:

US President Thomas Jefferson once said "If I am asked to choose between 'a Government without a press' and 'a press without a government' I will not hesitate a moment to choose the later. In fact one cannot think of a situation where there is no press. Though Legislature, Judiciary and Executive are the three constitutionally sanctioned institutions of democracy which are otherwise called the pillars of democracy press continues to be the fourth pillar even if it does not have the constitutional sanction.

In a democratic set up like India few elected representatives shape the destiny of the millions of people. Of course media widens the sphere of decision makers. It offers a platform to the sensitive elites who debate the issues of national importance in the form of articles, seminars and panel discussions. Nani A Palkhiwala (1994), an eminent jurist and academician in his book "We The Nation: The Last Decade" wrote, "to dissent is at the heart of every democracy." This right becomes the duty of every knowledgeable and right-minded citizen when government acts in a manner detrimental to civil liberties or otherwise against public interest.

Again an analysis of Abraham Lincoln's historic statement "Democracy is for the people of the people and by the people" would imply that the success or failure of democracy lies with the people. More active is their participation more vibrant is the democracy. It is the media that facilitates people's participation by helping them to know.

Parliament or the legislative assembly is the supreme policy making bodies. These institutions decide the destiny of the countrymen. Hence to make the discussion meaningful, the members (MPs and MLAs) have been provided the immunity cover so that they can express themselves freely and fearlessly in the discussion. The people are also very keen to know what decisions their honourable representatives have taken for their welfare. It is the press that brings this information to them.

In any legislative assembly or parliament there are two main players, the ruling party and the opposition party. According to the constitution the role of the opposi-

tion is to offer constructive criticism to the ruling party. Its effort is not to derail the government but to put the government back on the track. Sometimes there are government actions which the opposition feels are detrimental to the interest of the common man it opposes and pressurises the government to amend the policy. If the opposition stand is proper press supports the issue and government heeds to the pressure.

Hence press has enormous responsibility. During the question hour, a lot of information is generated. It is again the responsibility of the press to take this information to the common man. So in parliament as well as state legislative assemblies elaborate arrangements have been made for the press people to report the proceedings. But in due course of time there is a clear shift in the definition of news. It is no more the information that caters to the need of the people; it is the information that caters to the taste of the people. Hence newspaper prefers the unruly scenes in the house to the hardcore information. The members of the house have their own complains against the press people and vice versa. While press people complain of deterioration of the quality of the debate in the House, press is accused of biased reporting.

Hence this study was conducted to find out the situation in Delhi legislative Assembly and its coverage in the newspapers.

Research Objectives:

The broad objective of the study was to find out the fairness of the leading newspapers of Delhi in covering the proceedings of Delhi Legislative Assembly.

Specific objectives of the study were

- i. To find out the coverage of Delhi legislative assembly in the Delhi newspapers.
- ii. To make a qualitative analysis of the news of the proceedings of Delhi legislative Assembly covered in the Delhi Newspapers
- iii. To find out the perception of the press people regarding the adequacy of the facilities for the press people in the Legislative Assembly.
- iv. To study the perception of the press people regarding the coverage of the Legislative Assembly in the Delhi Newspapers.
- v. To know the perception of the press people regard-

ing the proceedings of Delhi Legislative assembly.
vi. To find out the perception of the MLAs regarding the coverage of the Delhi Legislative Assembly in the newspapers of Delhi.

Research Design:

The prevailing perception in the mind of the people is that press coverage of the legislative Assembly is lopsided. The unruly behaviors of the members, obstruction of the proceedings and other such proceedings are preferred to the hardcore important information that is generated during the question hours as for as press coverage is concerned. Hence this study was conceived to find the truth in it.

12 newspapers- six English and six Hindi were selected on the basis of their circulation. Newspapers during two sessions were collected (of course two days in advance) and the contents were analyzed. The proceeding of the Legislative Assembly was also collected. A comparison was made between these two to find out the discrepancy.

Based on the findings two sets of interview schedules were prepared and journalists and MLAs were interviewed. Only those journalists were interviewed who covered the Legislative Assembly of Delhi. Out of 12 journalists from 12 newspapers 11 journalists could be interviewed. Out of 70 MLAs 33 MLAs were interviewed.

The data collected were collated and inferences were drawn.

Data Analysis:

Members of the Legislative Assembly

Question No.-1

Do you read the news relating to the coverage of Assembly Proceedings:

(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)	(E)
Very attentively and eagerly	Attentively	Like any other news	S o m e - times	Never
29	04	-	-	-

29 MLAs stated that they read the news relating to the coverage of Assembly Proceedings very attentively & eagerly while 04 members told that they read such news attentively.

Question No.-2

Do the newspapers properly cover the proceedings of the Assembly :

(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)
YES	NO	AVERAGE	NO REPLY
08	20	04	01

20 MLAs stated that the newspapers did not cover the proceedings of the Assembly properly. Out of these, 11 members belonged to the Ruling Party and 09 Members were of the opposition party. According to 08 MLAs the coverage was proper. All these MLAs belonged to the Ruling Party.

02 MLAs of Ruling Party and 02 MLAs of opposition party termed it as average. One MLA of Ruling Party preferred no comment in this regard.

Question No.-3

If Not, the lacunae in the coverage?

According to 9 MLAs, good issues were not given importance in the coverage and even the factual details given by the members in their speech were ignored. 04 MLAs felt that the element of negativity was more in the coverage. 02 MLAs alleged that newspapers augment the sensationalism. While 02 other MLAs stated that coverage had no relevance to public interest. Apart from it, one MLA told that regional problems & issues were being ignored by the newspapers. One MLA stated that the initial proceeding of the day was paid more attention during the coverage.

02 MLAs put question mark on the credibility of the Media. While 05 other MLAs alleged biasness, partiality and political touch in the coverage. Out of these, 02 MLAs categorically stated that there was corruption in the media and news were managed.

08 MLAs were of the opinion that more importance was given to the senior and influential leaders in the coverage. Sometimes one MLA got importance more than he deserved while others got no importance.

07 Members of the opposition stated that less or no importance was given to the opposition in the coverage and it was more inclined to the Ruling Party. Contrary to it, 02 Members of the Ruling Party told that more importance was given to the opposition and facts and figures of the Government were ignored. While one MLA defined the limitation of the Journalists and stated that verbatim reporting of whole proceeding

was impossible. One MLA advised that the Journalists should be well aware of the Rules & procedures of the Assembly.

Question No.-4 Perception of the MLAS regarding the coverage of proceedings of Delhi Legislative Assembly.

(A) Coverage is:

Issue-based	11
Personality based	19
Both	02
No response	01

(B) The criteria of the coverage should be

Issue-based	31
Personality based	01
Both	--
No reply	01

(C) Which type of coverage gets priority:

Positive	03
Negative	24
On Merit	04
No reply	02

(D) What should be the criteria:

Positive	--
Negative	01
On Merit	30
No reply	02

(E) Loss of Message.

26 Members accepted the fact that all the points of the proceedings did not find place in the coverage. It should not be done and every aspect of the proceeding should be covered by the Journalists carefully. Out of these, 03 MLAs expressed their anguish over the importance not being given by the Media to the issues raised by them in the Special Mention under Rule 280. One Member stated that less importance was given to the coverage of Delhi Assembly as compared to other states. One MLA himself accepted that main reason of Loss of message was editing while one Member suggested that feedback should be provided by the Assembly Secretariat to the Journalists as they failed to properly note down the proceedings due to uproar in the House. 07 MLAs did not make any comment in this regard.

(F) Misinformation

26 MLAs stated that "misinformation was given in the news items. It should be avoided and story should be filed after verifying the facts". 07 MLAs did not make any comment in this regard.

(G) Improper Terminology

Regarding improper terminology, 26 MLAs were of the view that it should be avoided and the Journalists should have adequate knowledge of terminology. 07 MLAs did not make any comment in this regard.

(F) Distortion of Message

26 MLAs accepted that facts were distorted in the news and the Journalists should properly write the news without escaping the reality. Out of these, one MLA stated that Media was the mirror image of the society like literature. Hence, ethics of honesty should be followed in news writing. One MLA termed the Distortion as 'Main Problem'. While the other MLA straight forwardly opined, 'Distortion is the job of Media'. One MLA repeated this fact in these words, 'News is not written but manufactured by the Media'.

02 MLAs cited the reasons of Distortion as influence of the Government, policy of the newspaper and personal attitude of the Journalist. 07 MLAs did not make any comment in this regard.

(G) Spicy Language

26 MLAs while considering the use of spicy language improper, advised that the use of language should be decorous in view of the dignity of the House. Even One MLA accepted spicy language. According to him it enhanced the readability. 07 MLAs did not make any comment in this regard.

(H) Bias

26 Members accepted the fact that biasness prevailed in the news. They advocated for impartiality in the news. One MLA quoted the reason of political inclination of the newspaper while the other MLA stated that prejudice of the Journalists towards the ruling party and influential leaders were the main reasons. One MLA commented, "jo jaisa manage kar leta hai waisi khabar aa jati hai." 07 MLAs did not make any comment.

(I) Lack of Objectivity

26 Members were categorical that objectivity was the casualty which should be arrested. Out of these, one MLA stated that instead of publishing the actual state-

ment of the MLAS, the Journalists mix their own views in the News. Statement of one MLA in this connection was pertinent enough to mention that "writing news for the sake of writing is not appropriate. It creates record in the History which has long term effect." 07 MLAs did not make any comment in this regard.

Journalists Covering the Legislative Assembly: Out of 12 reporters from 12 newspapers selected for the study only 11 reporters could be interviewed.

1. Your comment on the standard of discussion.

V E R Y GOOD	GOOD	AVER- AGE	BAD	V E R Y BAD
NIL	2	2	6	1

Not a single journalist interviewed gave 'very good' certificate to the discussion in the Delhi Legislative assembly. However two respondents opined this as good. The majority six out of 11 interviewed termed it as bad and even one called it very bad.

2. Comment on the facilities provided to the press people

V E R Y GOOD	GOOD	AVER- AGE	BAD	VERY BAD
NIL	6	5	NIL	NIL

It seemed respondents were not dissatisfied at the facilities provides in the press gallery

The majority six out of 11 interviewed called it GOOD and for the rest it was average.

Respondents those who called it good found the atmosphere in the press gallery very cooperative. For them the sitting arrangement was satisfactory. CC TV, telephone, refreshments, 'agenda reaching timely' etc made them expressing satisfaction over the arrangements.

On the other hand those respondents termed it as 'average' complained the facilities provided in the press gallery as substandard. "Press men should have been provided head phone" opined one respondent. One more respondent said relevant papers concerning proceeding should be made available to the journalists. Internet facility would have helped the scribes to send the reports promptly. One respondent asked for. Permission to carry laptop would be highly beneficial. Even mobile phones should also have been permitted.

However three journalists opined that the existing facilities were adequate.

3. How long do you stay while covering the news?

It was also important to know how long the journalists stayed in the legislative assembly. Because it would determine the seriousness of the scribes at one hand and would reflect the deadline problem of the reporters at the other hand.

Six respondents out of 11 interviewed said they normally stayed till the proceedings were over. But rest five respondents said their stay depended upon the issue and the person who was to speak.

4. What extra facilities you require so that you can stay till the end of the proceedings?

A straight question was asked to the respondents.

Six respondents were very clear-"no extra facility was required". But the rest five respondents asked for fax, internet so that they can stay till the end of the proceedings.

5. Coverage is based on issues or personalities?

Regarding the coverage of the proceedings all but one respondent said the coverage was purely issue based. They said the coverage should be issue based only. But the lone dissent was of the opinion that the coverage should be based on both issues and personality and he practices that.

6. What type of news gets priority? Negative/positive or on merit

When one confronts an idealistic question the answer becomes obvious. Still any contrary response can always make news. The prevailing perception is that "negative news always gets the upper hand while selecting the news."

A straight question was thrown upon the respondents.

Except one respondent all the respondents said merit was the only criteria while selecting news. But the odd man out said it was the negative news which always got the upper hand while selecting the news.

7. Your comments on the coverage of the proceedings

A very negative picture has been depicted in the minds of the common man that the behavior of the MLAS inside the house puts the street hooligans to shame. The hiatus between the real picture and the projected picture was put before the respondents to seek their comments.

i. Loss of Message

Sometimes some important information generated during the question hours finds no mention in the newspapers. The respondents cited the following reasons for the loss of message found during the content analysis.

- a. Inadequate editorial space in the newspaper.
- b. Irrational editing.
- c. failing in the parameters of news values.
- d. Policy of the newspapers.
- e. Readers need.

Besides some confessional statements came from some respondents during the interview:

- a. Lack of knowledge of the journalists dealing with the coverage.
- b. Short of time
- c. Carelessness.
- d. Undesirable haste
- e. Work pressure
- f. Forgetfulness.

“Sometimes it so happened that fearing privilege some messages were avoided,” opined one respondent.

“Sometimes certain issues raised in the special mention got coverage before. Hence such news was dropped.

One respondent was very frank “personal relationship between the journalist and the leaders play an important role in loss of message.”

ii. Misinformation

Two respondents downplayed wrong reporting as human error.

According to some other respondents misinformation was owing to

- a. Avoidable noise created by some members prevents the scribes to listen the proceedings properly.
- b. Poor editing at the desk.
- c. Reporters ignorance of the rules and regulations
- d. No proper home work by the reporters.
- e. One shocking revelation came from two respondents “Even sometimes reporters reported the proceeding without even attending it. They further alleged that even inexperienced young reporters were deputed to cover the proceedings.

iii. Improper terminology

One respondent out rightly dismissed this allegation that reporters carried improper terminology.

But the majority opinion was just the reverse. They listed out the lacunae.

- a. Concerned reporter’s ignorance of the terminolo-

gies.

b. Unwanted interference with the story at the desk by inexperienced subeditors.

c. Of course carelessness, inexperienced reporters and lack of training etc.

d. One respondent was very categorical. “Journalists have stopped reading. Even if there is any doubt they never go to any senior to clarify.

e. One more respondent supplemented this statement- “In the era of Google. Com one can find anything and everything.

iv. Distortion of message

“There is an urge among the journalists to give more than relevant information that leads to wrong reporting. It is lack of proper and inadequate knowledge which results anomaly,” opined a respondent.

While one set of respondents felt that lack of training, irrational editing and above all wrong reporting itself were the reasons for the distortion of message.

The other set of respondents saw the distortions from the angle of the market forces. When circulation is the watch word news automatically becomes a product. To make it marketable it needed to be attractive. In the whole process facts become a casualty.

One respondent commented “Narrow personal interests engineer such distortions. Sometimes the distortions are made out of ignorance and some times knowingly”.

v. Spicy language

There was unanimity among the respondents regarding spicy language. “This has become inevitable due to market demand, prioritising taste over need and to boost the circulation.

vi. Bias

The answers of the respondents were really eye opening.

a. “Bias was due to the policy of the newspaper” opined five respondents.

b. “Personal bias and prejudice also contributed to the bias”. Felt three respondents.

c. “Sometimes to discourage some individuals/issues, reporting becomes bias. It was sometimes the outcome of a reporter’s revenge.

vii. Lack of objectivity

While four of the 11 respondents interviewed dismissed the allegation of 'lack of objectivity' in Legislative reporting, rest seven respondents had their own tales to tell. All the lacunae mentioned so far have been repeated by the respondents as the reasons for lack of objectivity

One respondent went one step forward. "Reporters were trained regularly in the newspaper. Style book is no more found in the newspaper offices and filtering of the news has become a matter of the past."

Epilogue:

There existed a symbiotic relationship between the journalists and the politicians. They need each others' help and are also critical of each other. The story of Delhi Legislative Assembly was no different.

33 MLAs out of 70 MLAs of the house were interviewed and a brute majority 26 MLAs were found highly critical of the coverage of the proceedings of Delhi Legislative Assembly. They complained of bias in coverage, personality centric coverage, lacking objectivity, distortion of facts and loss of message. Opposition members complained that ruling members got a better deal while ruling members had the same complain. They said the facts and figures of the Government were always ignored. "News is always managed," alleged one of the MLAs.

On the other hand Journalists opined that the debates are substandard. The reporters engaged in covering the house agreed to all the complaints but they had ready excuses for the same. They blamed it to the desk. "Sometimes lack of editorial space resulted in loss of message", explained one respondent. "Due to noise it becomes impossible to report the factual details," was one more excuse offered for 'loss of message'.

One major complaint made by one of the MLAs was that reporters report not what the MLAs stated in the house, but they report what they think the MLA should have said. Negative news got the upper hand, news is always served spicy. Even reporters did not know the rules and regulations of the house.

"No, not at all," there was a cry in unison, "News is not spicy, news is selected purely on the basis of merit, based on issues", but some of the respondents were very honest in their expression. Admitting their short comings some of them said, "true, reporters lack knowledge of the rules, they do not do the necessary

ground work." Commenting in general one reporter said "the truth is negative news is always preferred to positive news," Yes this was the lone reporter who said so. "We have forgotten reading, there is no style book in the newspaper office, and filtration of the news has become a matter of the past. Reporters are not serious, even without attending the house they report the proceedings".

He put the entire blame on the market forces. "News is that which sells. So news was selected purely on the basis of market demand".

The findings were revealing. The prevailing perception was found cent percent correct, Reasons could differ. But the interviews of the MLAs and that of the journalists revealed that. There is deterioration of ethical values in every walk of life and media has not been insulated. But today's media is totally guided by the market forces and news is a product. So this is anything but common that news is prepared keeping the market demand in the mind.

But can the largest democracy of the world afford this unhealthy trend? Fortunately journalists were forth coming in their expression. They are also victims of the trend. Legislative reporting is perhaps the most important, because proper reporting would educate the people regarding the developments of the state. More they are educated more will be their participation. That will also put moral pressure on the representative of the people. This trend needs to be arrested. Both the members and the media should take the business of the house seriously.

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