Contemporary Watchdogs Domesticated: Conduct of Punjabi Print Media in Punjab During the Assembly Elections of 2007

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The following study provides a close scrutiny of the conduct of Punjabi newspapers during the Punjab Assembly Elections of 2007 and demonstrates, with the help of comparative empirical analysis of three newspapers (namely, *Ajit*, *Jagbani* and *Punjabi Tribune*), that the media has diluted and compromised its role as a watchdog of democracy. The study brings out that several factors have come together to erode the democratic role and function of the vernacular press. These factors include commercial competitiveness, communalization of the media space, changing technologies and a compromise with journalistic ethics on account of business and political rivalries. The most important finding of the study is that democratic political space in the vernacular press has shrunk alarmingly. This has happened at a time when the space of political deliberations should be expanding.

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"The marriage between media and politics and the economy has shaped the culture of our politics" - Florangel Rosario Braid

Introduction: Democracy, Elections and Expected Role of the Media

The important functions that we can expect the media to perform in a democratic society include keeping an eye on socio-political developments, identifying the most relevant issues, providing a platform for debate across a diverse range of views, holding officials to account on behalf of citizens, involving people in the political process, and resisting the efforts of outside forces to subvert the independence of the media (Fog, 2004, p. 2). Across the entire range of these functions, the media has certainly become a decisive factor in electoral politics all over the democratic world. It is obvious that elections are of crucial importance in a democracy and constitute the process whereby the leaders who pilot the affairs of a nation are elected. This electoral process allows all eligible voters to exercise, as democratic citizens, their rights (to vote and to be elected) in the formation of a government. From the time the elections are announced to the day they take place, a period of usually six to eight weeks passes. During this period the role of media is supposed to be very crucial as this is the time the rulers and the ruled interact directly on a common platform provided by the media.

The media is supposed to provide correct and reliable information about the competing political parties and their programmes and candidates, and thus to actively contribute to the formation of opinion of the electorate. It has an active role in informing the public about what the politicians are promising and the politicians about what the people want, and thus it is supposed to ensure that the polls are free and fair. This may include formal voter education material provided by the electoral management body; alternately or additionally, the media themselves may produce their own voter education materials. The information supplied by the media does have a bearing on public opinion as it influences the individual voters' decisions. Simultaneously, the media also performs the role of a watchdog by exposing the errors and wrong-doings of those in power (Fog, 2004). Meinardus suggests that the role of the media is to enlighten and inform the citizens so that they are in a position to make reasonable decisions on election day (Friedrich Naumann Foundation For Liberty, 2004). The overall aim of media coverage during election campaigns should be fair and objective reporting and unbiased information dissemination (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, 2004). This is important because it is impossible to find a democratic country today in which a candidate could go to elections without using the media in one way or another. Moreover, whenever political parties launch their election campaigns, they have a clear and planned set of expectations from the media. Consequently, they deal with the media on the basis of a considered policy and strategy.

Predominance of the Print Media

While the role of mass media in democratic political contests is not new, the media platforms used to disseminate information among the public have certainly changed with developments in communication channels. Political communication strategies are also, to a great extent, technology-driven. The accessibility of different media platforms matters a lot when it comes to election campaigning for a specific electorate. Although the accessibility of general public to different media platforms varies from one country to another, in most parts of the world, television today plays a dominant role in political campaigns, followed by radio and print media. Radio programs are still important in less developed countries where every household cannot afford a TV set. The role of print media also should not be underestimated, as it has largely emerged as an agenda-setter particularly in the socio-political spheres. Moreover, the print media has historical significance, as noted by Benedict Anderson in his famous study, *Imagined Communities*, of the rise of print media, as an indispensable force aiding the rise of national consciousness among the people. A relatively new vehicle for political communication is the Internet. The use of the Internet for campaigning sometimes varies drastically, and this reflects what is commonly termed as the growing digital divide in highly developed societies like Japan and the USA. No serious political campaign can be carried out today without at least a website (Meinardus, 2004). Over the years then, due to the advancement of technology, the impact of media has increased manifold in

every sphere of life, particularly in the political domain. No wonder the political institutions are increasingly becoming dependent on and are being shaped by the mass media. Many scholars have rightly termed the current situation as "mediatization of politics" (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999). They further argue that "[m]ediatization is, in fact, a phenomenon common to political systems of almost all democratic countries, where it has taken different shapes and developed at varying speeds.… The process of mediatization of political actors, events, and discourses has been a major trend in political systems of the 1990s" (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999).

Indian Electoral Scene and the Media

In India, elections are a colourful affair, with a liberal use of posters, banners and music. Many candidates travel on specially built coaches adapted to resemble medieval chariots. At the same time, in recent elections, political parties and candidates have increasingly begun to use new media technologies too. The growing number of mobile users and Internet surfers has provided the political parties new platforms for campaigning. Most of the political parties and candidates now have their own websites to attract voters. Political parties also send catchy text messages to voters through mobile phones. A party may use SMSs and e-mails to reach the voters who may otherwise be apathetic. Mobile phone numbers and e-mail addresses of voters are compiled by the parties with the help of local resident associations and clubs. In India, however, the print media still has not only the upper hand over the electronic media, but the general public also has greater faith in newspapers. Newspapers are treated as a significant source of information by the common people who believe that whatever is written in the newspaper has a special truth value. It is particularly true of the countryside where people often base their political arguments on newspaper reports. They look upon newspapers as an authentic, even sacred, source of information. In fact, there are several socio-economic and historical reasons for people's faith in the printed word. One of these reasons is the inaccessibility of the electronic media to a large section of the population.

The cable and satellite TV network has not fully reached the countryside and the majority of the population still watches national television. When it comes to new communication channels, the Internet is still unavailable in majority of the villages. Certain historical reasons could be also located in the leading role the newspapers played during the Indian freedom struggle. In 1920, the Indian National Congress under Gandhi's leadership reorganized itself into provincial units based on language, even though these did not correspond to the administrative divisions of British India. This innovation recognized the power of local languages to influence the minds of large groups of people, something that English could not do, nor for that matter could Hindustani. Such developments greatly stimulated the growth of a nationalist press in regional languages. Robin Jeffery, talking about the rise of newspaper publishers in this period states that in the twenty largest states of India in 1994, seven newspapers "had originated in this period (1920-32) due to intense nationalist

idealism….these regional newspapers dedicated to the nationalist cause represented influential Congress politicians who in turn articulated the interests of their own class" (Jeffrey, 1997). Nevertheless, the emergence of these papers was largely motivated by the attempt to raise the political consciousness of common people.

At the state level, vernacular press takes precedence over the national press. In Punjab, the vernacular press has always played a relatively more important role. If it can be stated that politics is essentially local and regional, than nothing covers local politics like local and regional newspapers do. Compared with any other medium, voters count on the newspapers to find out what is going on in their communities. They know that unlike TV or radio news programmes, newspapers cover local issues of everyday importance. They know that with the newspaper they would not be getting a mere 30 seconds sound bite but would get some real in-depth coverage of the issues which are really important to them. They read about the issues that usually determine how they would cast their vote. No other medium covers the issues directly related to the people as thoroughly as does the print media, especially the vernacular press. In fact, the vernacular press even sets, to some extent, the agenda for political parties. On the other hand, parties try to use the media to their advantage.

However, one major drawback is that people who read newspapers give a lot of uncritical credence to the written word. They still have not sufficiently understood the nexus of market economy, consumerism, entertainment industry and news media. The vertical nature of the news (written word) is, however, highly suspect. Besides this, our education system does not foster critical consciousness. The majority of population is illiterate and, even today, villagers gather on the same spot to read a newspaper or listen to the news from a newspaper reader. On the other hand, radio and TV have evolved largely into the media for entertainment. It is the newspapers which carry information on current affairs, entertainment and consumer goods. The written word still wields special power. In short, the newspapers, thus, continue to play a more important role vis-a-vis the other media.

Punjabi Print Media: Background and Context of the 2007 Assembly Election

In 1966, when the present-day state of Punjab was formed as a result of the reorganization of the states, the largest daily circulation of a paper in *Gurmukhi* script was only 8000 copies. No Gurmukhi daily had enough circulation to merit a listing in the Press and Advertisers' Yearbook. An immense change occurred over the following 25 years. By 1991, more than 650,000 newspapers in Gurmukhi were circulating each day (Jeffery 1997). The most significant newspapers in terms of quantity were *Ajit*, *Jagbani* and *Punjabi Tribune*. *Ajit* and *Jagbani* are published from Jalandhar while *Punjabi Tribune* is published from Chandigarh. These newspapers continue to play an important role in Punjab politics today.

After independence, the two issues that gripped Punjab politics were those of Punjabi language and Punjabi statehood. The editor and owners of *Ajit* took a firm stand in favour of Punjabi language and Punjabi statehood which was fairly obvious in their editorials. The editor not only wrote editorials but also took part in political rallies. The communal arguments that were made in these rallies would be published as news the following day. On the other side, the family which owned the Hind Samachar Group of newspapers and was to publish *Jagbani* (from 1978 onwards) also did the same thing, but they opposed Punjabi statehood and the Punjabi language, often writing provocative editorials against these two. The press was thus divided on these issues, and in an attempt to propagate its own perspective, each side often crossed the borderlines of responsible and objective journalism. We may say that these two newspapers were at war. The reason for this can be located partly in business interests, with each side trying to grab the attention of the public by writing more impassioned editorials (Johal, 2005). In an interview, Vijay Chopra (the Editor of *Jagbani)*, admitted that Hamardad (the Editor of *Ajit*) had asked him to write against him, and he would in turn write against Chopra. As a result, it was expected that the circulation of papers would increase. The present Editor of *Ajit*, commenting on the role of Punjabi press during the time, admits that "Punjabi journalism became vocal and loud, and even communal" in those troubled times (Singh, 2005).

The year 1978 is very crucial insofar as the Punjabi press is concerned. In that year, the Hind Samachar Group started publishing *Jagbani*, and the Tribune Trust started publishing the *Punjabi Tribune* from Chandigarh. The *Punjabi Tribune* established itself as secular, non-communal and unbiased newspaper. It followed the ethics of journalism whereas *Jagbani*, not breaking with the old tradition, established itself as an heir to *Hind Samachar* and *Punjab Kesari* (Johal 2005). From this year onwards, Punjab was in a crisis for almost two decades. The Jalandhar press (*Ajit* and *Jagbani*) repeated what they had done during the *Punjabi Suba* struggle. They wrote editorials against each other and exploited the sentiments and feelings of one community against the other. Newspapers did this to fulfill only one motive, which was to increase their circulation. They succeeded in this aim. In 1978, the circulation of *Ajit* was 46,000, of *Jagbani* 9,000, and of *Punjabi Tribune* 30,000. In 1988, the circulation of *Ajit* went up to 1, 24,000, of *Jagbani* to 97,000, and of *Punjabi Tribune* to 46,000. During this period, both *Ajit* and *Jagbani* substantially increased the circulation, whereas the circulation of *Punjabi Tribune* grew only marginally though it still firmly stood by ethics of secular, non-communal and liberal press (Johal 2005). After 1992 when normalcy returned, *Ajit* became the mouthpiece of SAD (Shiromani Akali Dal [Badal]) and the editor, B.S. Hamdard, got nominated to the Rajya Sabha, ostensibly as a reward for his services.

Punjab, a leading state a few decades ago, was facing a grim crisis on various fronts. Its agrarian economy was in a shambles because of heavy indebtedness among farmers; the urban economy had no secure foundation because it was dependent on the rural economy; education was in a mess; and

youth faced unemployment and were falling prey to drugs. The social system and values were crumbling. The crime rate was going up, notwithstanding the highest number of policemen per 10,000 of population. In terms of the number of policemen per 100 square kilometers in area Punjab ranks first (Singh, 2008). Punjab's economy remains overwhelmingly agricultural and has yet to witness a transition from agricultural to industrial economy. But agriculture has become unsustainable because of the shrinking size of land holdings.

The main economic and social issues facing Punjab at the time of elections were the following. After independence, Punjab was viewed as the most dynamic and progressive state of the country, particularly for its success in the agrarian sector. The Green Revolution was successful in other parts of India as well but it was Punjab that it primarily came to be identified with it (Jodhka, 2006). Punjab was then considered to be a leading state of the country with the highest per capita income. However, the excitement did not last very long. After two decades of growth, the Green Revolution began to lose its effectiveness, and was followed by a series of crises (Jodhka, 2006). From politics and economics to culture and ecology, everything seemed to be in a state of crisis in Punjab.

Before analyzing the content of the print media it is worth reminding ourselves of the socio-economic context in which these elections were being held. Around the time of the 2007 Assembly Elections, the overall situation in Punjab was extremely alarming. The agriculture sector was not only moving towards stagnation of yields but also to a squeeze in incomes (Gill and Singh, 2006). The Peasantry increasingly came under debt. The manifestation of the agrarian crisis in the form of suicides had reached dangerous levels (Gill and Singh, 2006). The indebtedness of the surveyed farmers who had committed suicide in the Malwa sub-region of Punjab was in the range of Rs 10,000 to Rs 6.5 lakh, and the average outstanding debt was Rs 1.25 lakh per farmer household (Gill and Singh, 2006). The rural debt kept mounting and reached Rs 24,000 crore in 2007, according a state government report (*The Hindu,* 2007).

The extensive use of new agricultural technologies had led to grave degradation of the environment. As both wheat and paddy are water intensive crops, massive ground water-based irrigation resulted in a depleting water table in Punjab. According to estimates, the water table in central Punjab was going down at the rate of 0.23 cm per annum (Chandhoke, 2006). Experts also blame the indiscriminate use of pesticides for serious contamination of both water and crops. A study prepared by the Punjab Pollution Control Board has pointed that out of the 183,243 people (39,732 families) surveyed, the number of confirmed cancer cases is alarming. It was 103.2 per 100,000 in Talwandi Sabo, compared to 71 per 100,000 in Chamkaur Sahib. The study covered 129 villages in Talwandi Sabo in Bathinda and Chamkaur Sahib in Roop Nagar (*The South Asian,* 2005).

The development expenditure of the state government had dropped from 71.92 percent to 64.92 percent of the total government expenditure in the period 1981-91, largely on account of militancy. There was no reversal of this trend even when normalcy returned in the 1990s (Chandhoke, 2006). Declining

employment avenues for the rural people was compounded by the fact that other sectors of the economy provided few opportunities for employment. According to the 2004 Punjab Development Report "One of the serious problems Punjab is confronted with at present is the high volume of unemployment" (quoted from Chandhoke, 2006). This report had emphasized the gravity of the problems. According to one estimate, approximately 12.85 lakh agricultural workers were surplus to requirement (Chandhoke, 2006).

In 1984 there were 53 blocks categorized as dark zones, in 1995 there were 84 and in 2005 the figure went up to 108 out of the total 138 development blocks in Punjab. Ground water level falling much faster then assumed. With this the situation worsened even further. In 1980 there are 3712 villages identified as drinking water problem villages, this figure went up to 6287 in 1990, and then in year 2000 the number went as high as 8518 and soon 11,849 villages or habitations out of total 12,423 in Punjab were facing drinking water problems (Dutta, 2006). The falling water level had led to increase in power consumption in the agriculture sector in the state. But the Punjab State Electricity Board had added very little to the generation capacity in the previous decade and half.

With the state spending less and less on public health, government hospitals and health centers in Punjab suffered from lack of medical supplies, and shortage of doctors; on the other hand, the funds that were available were not being used fully. According to Rajesh Kumar Aggarwal, most of the public health budget was being spent on salaries during this period. The percentage of public health spending in the State budget was between 1.8 and 4.5 per cent. The Punjab Development Report (2002) revealed that 70 per cent of the sub-centres, 67 per cent of the Subsidiary Health Centres or dispensaries, 62 per cent of the PHCs and 51 per cent of the Community Health Centres did not have proper buildings. Perhaps, some answers may lie in Punjab's spending patterns. Over the past few decades, the State's expenditure on health and family welfare has been falling as a percentage of the annual Budget. In 1980-81, spending on health comprised 5.49 per cent of the State Budget so that during the Tenth Plan (2002-07), state spending on health formed only 2.28 per cent of the Budget (*The South Asian,* 2006).

In 2007, out of 100 children in the age group of 6 to 11, only 76 percent went to government schools and 53 percent of them entered middle school. Just 33 percent students reached Matric, and only 10 to 12 percent appeared in the 12th examination. The worst scene was in higher education, where only 5 percent of students from government schools actually managed to benefit from it. Punjab which was then at 5th place in the country in primary education was apparently joining the states of Bihar and Jharkhand. Nearly 10,000 posts of teachers in elementary schools and 22000 in other schools lay vacant. About 1100 schools were without principals (Bains, 2007).

Scope of the Present Study

For the purpose of our study, we have chosen the news coverage of fifteen days for our analysis, from the last date for withdrawal of candidature that is 30 January 2007 to 13th Feb 2007 in the three papers. The elections took place on 13th of Feb. We have examined two pages of each of the papers: the front page and the editorial page.

We now proceed with the analysis of the front-page of selected newspapers in order to see the distribution of space between advertisements and news against the backdrop of the moral code supposed to govern this distribution. As per this code, laid down by the Second Press Commission (1984), the newspapers should publish news and advertisements in 60:40 ratio (Kumar 1994, p. 202).

Advertising and News Content of Ajit, Jagbani and Punjabi Tribune

Ajit				Jagbani		
	Advt.%	News%			Advt.%	News%
30-Jan	67.2%	32.8%		30-Jan	86.4%	13.6%
31-Jan	69.8%	30.2%		31-Jan	67.4%	32.6%
1-Feb	72.5%	27.5%		1-Feb	88.7%	11.3%
2-Feb	56.7%	43.3%		2-Feb	88.7%	11.3%
3-Feb	67.6%	32.4%		3-Feb	71.8%	28.2%
4-Feb	77.9%	22.1%		4-Feb	83.4%	16.6%
5-Feb	77.5%	22.5%		5-Feb	72.7%	27.3%
6-Feb	77.3%	22.7%		6-Feb	34.1%	65.9%
7-Feb	76.0%	24.0%		7-Feb	93.2%	6.8%
8-Feb	55.3%	44.7%		8-Feb	75.5%	24.5%
9-Feb	77.3%	27.7%		9-Feb	35.4%	64.6%
10-Feb	54.0%	46.0%		10-Feb	53.4%	46.6%
11-Feb	79.4%	20.6%		11-Feb	60.4%	39.6%
12-Feb	73.9%	26.1%		12-Feb	88.8%	11.2%
13-Feb	59.1%	40.9%		13-Feb	68.6%	31.4%

It is significant that during the fifteen days under analysis, *Ajit* did not follow the code for even a single day as it gave more space than prescribed to the advertisements as compared to the news. News got only 20.6% to 27.7% space for eight days, 30.2% to 32.8% space for three days and 40.9% to 46.0% space for four days.

Jagbani followed the moral code of conduct for two days only when it gave 34.1 and 35.4 % space to advertisements and 65.9% and 64.6% to news.

Otherwise, the news received less than 40% space on twelve days, less than 16.6% on six days, and it did not even reach the double digits on 7th February. On this day, the news was given only 6.8% of the space.

The *Punjabi Tribune* also did more or less the same thing. News got less than 40% of space on thirteen days; for the remaining two days, it got only 44.2% and 56.8%.

Punjabi Tribune		
	Advt.%	News%
30-Jan	71.3%	28.7%
31-Jan	65.1%	34.9%
1-Feb	68.6%	31.4%
2-Feb	67.6%	32.4%
3-Feb	63.0%	37.0%
4-Feb	67.3%	32.7%
5-Feb	72.3%	27.7%
6-Feb	73.5%	26.5%
7-Feb	71.6%	28.4%
8-Feb	73.9%	26.1%
9-Feb	69.9%	30.1%
10-Feb	43.2%	56.8%
11-Feb	67.8%	32.2%
12-Feb	71.9%	28.1%
13-Feb	55.8%	44.2%

A comparison discloses that only *Jagbani* followed the moral code of conduct though for just two days, whereas the other newspapers did not even do that. News received the minimum percentage of space in *Punjabi Tribune*: less than 40% for thirteen days. Then comes *Jagbani*: twelve days. *Ajit* is the last in the list: only eleven days. If we compare which newspaper gave the highest percentage of space to advertisements, we find that *Jagbani* gets the first place with 93.2% of space given during one of these days to advertisements, followed by *Ajit* with 79.4%, and by *Punjabi Tribune* with 73.5%. Similarly, when we compare the space granted to news, we find that for five days news got less than 16.7% of space in *Jagbani*. No other newspaper even touched this percentage. For nine days, *Jagbani* gave less than 30% of space to news, thus achieving the top position among the three papers, followed by *Ajit* and *Punjabi Tribune*, which both gave less than 30% space for eight days and six days respectively.

Media Space: Between News and Advertisements

The media is supposed to articulate social norms but, as the tables reveal, the media itself has been violating the norms prescribed for it. The newspapers, during the elections, gave more space to advertisements, with the percentage of advertisements at times going up to more than 85%. Meanwhile, news got only a marginal space of 15%. The least space given to news in one of these newspapers was 6.8%.

During the period of elections, readers expect informed discussions to be published in newspapers so that they can get a certain perspective on public issues. However, as indicated by the figures cited above, this is also the time when the media is tempted to exploit the situation and earn money by selling newspapers space to advertisers. It is conveniently forgotten that people buy newspapers primarily for news, not for motivated propaganda to buy commodities. It is clear that *Jagbani* and *Ajit* topped in selling newspaper space, arguably because both these papers are privately owned. *Punjabi Tribune*, on the contrary, could avoid the temptation probably because it is run by a trust, in which editorial decisions are governed by public interest and not by the motive of private profit. Moreover, the trust functions on the principle of collective public responsibility.

The story of advertising in Indian newspapers has two elements not commonly found in the West. The first is that in the years before 1947 many Indians, particularly those sympathetic to the national movement, regarded advertisements as a compromise. The second is that after independence, in a controlled and planned economy, whatever advertising was there, went overwhelmingly to English language newspapers. And it is significant that between 1947 and 1977 the government advertising itself was crucial for the survival and health of newspapers (Jeffery. 1997).

Nationalist newspapers in English and Indian languages took their lead from M.K. Gandhi. His weeklies did not accept advertisements, "ninety-nine percent" of which he deemed "totally useless….If there were no system of advertisements, we are surely to save at least half the price [of any article]". Gandhi declared that "the sole aim of journalism should be service." As late as in 1965, a study of small newspapers found six proprietors who ran their publications at a loss "as a missionary work" (Jeffery, 1997). But in the 1990s, driven by the "liberalization" of the Indian economy and the arrival of multi-national corporations, advertising grew, according to an industry magazine, "at a frenetic pace, making it resemble the California gold rush" (Jeffery, 1997).

Political Parties and the Media: Growing Interdependence

But the media space that is ideally to be used for political debate and commentary has come to be used for selling political and other goods and even images. Slowly, the civic and democratic values that were supposed to guide broadcasting have been replaced by commercial and entertainment interests. More often the newspapers now give information about the candidates and their campaigns through paid political advertisements than through reporting and analysis. What is more, a substantial part of this information is an exercise in

personal image-building, having little bearing on pressing political and socio-economic issues. Braid uses the term "showbizocracy" for this phenomenon. She argues that "the marriage between media and politics and the economy has shaped the culture of our politics" (FNF, 2004). Paulynn Sicam notes that "there is manipulation because there is a lot of money to be made" (FNF, 2004).

In recent years, some studies have appeared which foreground the significance of media in shaping public perception of political personalities. A study conducted by McCombs during the regional and municipal elections of 1995 in Spain found that both the newspaper and television news shaped the voters' opinion about candidates. Similarly, another study found that "the press significantly contributed to the construction of candidate images in the heads of the voters" during the 1994 Taipei mayoral election (Barrett and Barrington 2005).

In this way, when people have a low confidence in political parties or become critical about them, the media uses its skills to cast the parties in a new light. While doing this, the media uses subtle psychological techniques to persuade people to accept facile solutions offered by it as the only possible solutions for various intractable problems. The most effective of these techniques allow a manipulator to achieve the desired results by implanting in the public consciousness those social processes which are most acceptable to him/her. With the development of these techniques, convincing communication (based upon facts and arguments) has gradually been transformed into suggestive communication. As a result, the focus has shifted to the development of external but subliminal techniques and methods aimed to deliberately modify the psychic processes, conditions and behavior, so that the subject cannot control his or her responses to external stimulation (Dzyaloshinsky, 1999).

Moreover, political leaders know that political agendas are quite significantly shaped by the media as the campaigns are being increasingly conducted through the media. Hence political candidates now directly appeal to citizens without relying on the party apparatus. As a result, political campaigns are now becoming more expensive and technically complex. One usually notices that there is today widespread cynicism towards political parties. In fact, people tend to trust the media more than they trust the political parties. The crisis of political parties has, thus, in a way expanded the functions of mass media. Political parties appear to be unequipped to solve the problems of poverty, education, clean drinking water and public health, so that they rely increasingly on cosmetic solutions in place of real solutions. As a result, they nowadays have media managers who are assigned the task of supplying the absence of political debate with empty rhetoric and attractive images and sounds. Indeed, one can venture to state that today in the absence of political followers there is hardly any genuine political leadership; after all, it is the followers who produce leaders. Consequently, political parties often look like MNCs and the "leaders" conduct themselves like CEOs.

Political parties tend to see voters as consumers. In this race for consumers they try to buy the maximum space in newspapers at whatever cost. In consequence, election campaigning becomes money-driven. And only those

parties get reporting space which buys advertisement space and, consequently, the basic issues affecting common people are totally forgotten. So in this way a self–perpetuating cycle emerges that undermines democracy. Expensive advertisements mean candidates must raise huge amounts of money. Big money donations and slick ad campaign breed cynicism and disinterest towards politics, and this translates into low ratings because of political coverage (which stands reduced), prompting candidates to buy even more ads. The mantra is that those who will not be able to raise the funds will not get space in the media.

Another notable thing about the election being analyzed here is that the newspapers also published political parties' news written by their very leaders. The result is that one cannot differentiate between news and advertisement. The border separating news, advertising and entertainment thus gets increasingly blurred. We can see how market forces shape the print media, which in turn shapes public opinion and political climate. According to J.M. Balkin, "Media adopt[s] two basic strategies for simulating transparency; diversion of attention and supplementation of reality. The goal is to consume the opponent's time and attention. In other words, the skillfully played discovery battle creates new objects of contention; it produces ever new things to be concerned about, to become angry about, and to fight about" (Balkin, 1998).

Politicians seek to shape public opinion and benefit from it, and the media seeks to entertain the public and maintain public attention and influence. Nevertheless in achieving their ends, politicians and the media both divert the audience's attention and supplement politics with fabricated political 'realties'. Jean Baudrillard remarks that in this way the media creates a new reality, a hyper-reality, composed of the intermingling of people's behaviour and media images. The world of hyper-reality is constructed of simulacra - images which only get their meanings from other images and hence have no grounding in an "external reality" (Giddens, 2001). In short, the language of politics gets wedded to that of advertising, public relations and showbiz.

Comparative Analysis of Newspapers (Part I): Editorial Content

We will next try to critically evaluate the structure and discourse of the editorial page. The editorial has a significant place in the newspaper wherein the editor makes considered observations on current issues, identifies the problems in society, and opens the issues to public discussion and deliberation. The editor also acts as a kind of watchdog on whom the public can rely for uncovering the lapses and wrongdoings of those who command power. During the time of elections, the editorial page acquires special importance for people as well as for the rulers as it focuses on the agenda before the political parties.

Ajit

Analysis of *Ajit* Editorials from 30 Jan to 13 Feb			
Total Number of Editorials	On International Issues	On National Issues	On Election Issues
17	3	5	9

Editorials on Election Issues in *Ajit*					
Total Editorials	Write-ups on Punjab Issues	Critical Political Commentary	On Manifesto	On Surveys	On Election Process
9	1	6	1		1

During the period from 30 January to 13 February 2007, *Ajit* published seventeen editorials during the fifteen days out of which three were on international issues, five on national issues and nine on electoral issues.

When we further analyze the editorial contents on election issues, we can see that out of the total of nine editorials on election issues, more than half were in the nature of political commentary. For example, these editorials discuss rather simplistically only the arithmetic of seats between political parties, or try to predict who will win the election. The remaining editorials included one on the election process, one on manifestos, and one on Punjab issues. During these days, Punjab was crying for water, farmers were committing suicide; education and healthcare were in the grip of severe crisis. Yet *Ajit*, "the voice of Punjab", as the motto of the paper has it, maintained an unbroken silence on all these pressing and troubling issues before Punjab.

Jagbani

Jagbani carried 26 editorials, of which more than half dealt with national issues, three with international issues, and just seven with elections.

Analysis of *Jagbani* Editorials from 30 Jan to 13 Feb			
Total Editorials	On International Issues	On National Issues	On Election Issues
26	3	16	7

Editorials on Election Issues in *Jagbani*						
Total Editorials	Write-ups on Punjab Issues	Critical Political Commentary	On Manifesto	On Survey	On Election Process	On Election Violence
7		7				

In *Jagbani*, a total number of seven editorials were written on election issues: all the seven were, significantly, in the nature of critical political commentary. However, not a single editorial was on the issues before Punjab, on manifestos of parties, on the election process, on election-related violence, or on electoral survey.

Punjabi Tribune

During the fifteen days under study, *Punjabi Tribune* carried 26 editorials. Out of these, three were on international issues, eleven on national issues, and twelve were on election issues.

Analysis of *Punjabi Tribune* Editorials from 30 Jan to 13 Feb			
Total number of Editorials	On International Issues	On National Issues	On Punjab Election Issues
26	3	11	12

Editorials on Election Issues in *Punjabi Tribune*						
Total Editorials	Write-ups on Punjab Issues	Critical political commentary	Manifesto	Survey	Election process	Election violence
12	2	5	2	1	1	1

If we further examine the editorials on Punjab elections, we find that there were only five on political parties in which serious comments were made. The issues included fake affidavits by politicians, and the exploitation of religion, caste and class for votes. One write-up was on a pre-poll survey, especially on how the survey was conducted and how it was really baseless. The critical analysis of the parties' manifestos formed the subject matter of one full editorial.

Print media serves a democracy best by enabling open debate and discussion that exposes individuals and groups to different or alternative and opposing ideas, viewpoints, opinions and beliefs. Media as a public communication channel has the potential, if editorial freedom is respected, to be an open forum

for serious and meaningful democratic debate and discussion. Elections are about choices to be made by the people; and therefore the media as an open forum for discussion and debate should allow citizens, candidates and parties to openly discuss and debate relevant issues. In-depth analyses and debates on critical issues afford a perspective on various problems and concerns. The media in a democratic society are supposed to be part of a system of checks and balances and if they are controlled by powerful corporate or state forces and fail to carry out their watchdog functions, they end up as nothing more than instruments of propaganda and entertainment (Kellner, 2006).

We can reasonably aver, on the basis of what we have seen above, that the mass media are becoming a tool for manipulating public opinion and that commercial interests are increasingly taking precedence over public interests: "Public opinion is not formed through open, rational discussion, but through manipulation and control" (Giddens, 2001). As Pritam Singh has remarked in his study of the role of the media during the Punjab crisis in the 1980s, media's performance has been "discreditable" as time and again it has "resort[ed] to lies and half-truths", perverting actual information to suit political vested interests (Singh,1985). However, the task of socially responsible newspapers is to counteract any attempts to misinform the voters about the true background of a candidate or about the real substance of the promises made and the measures proposed by them. This means it becomes necessary to monitor and disclose manipulation and other devious methods designed to mislead voters.

Comparative Analysis (Part II): Content of Articles

We shall next consider the main articles in the three newspapers during the period under study. The number and classification of major edit-page articles in *Ajit* are displayed in the following table.

Total Articles	Critical	Religious/ Historical	National issues	Election arithmetic	Election scenario
13	2	Nil	5	1	5

During these 15 days there were only 13 articles; in the last two days, there was not a single major article but a few news stories were used to fill that space. Out of the 13 articles, five were on national issues, one on the election arithmetic, and five generally dealt with the political scenario of Punjab, for example:
1. What is the impact of PM's rallies on Punjab?
2. Will the result of assembly elections be surprising?
3. How will the third front impact Punjab politics?

Only two articles addressed education in Punjab and other common problems.

The number and classification of major edit-page articles in *Jagbani* are displayed in the following table.

Total	Critical	Religious/	National	Election	Election

Articles		Historical	issues	arithmetic	process
15	0	0	15	0	0

Jagbani was manifestly the worst performer in this regard. No major article was published on Punjab elections; all major articles were about national issues only.

The number and classification of major edit-page articles in *Punjabi Tribune* are displayed in the following table.

Total Articles	Critical	Religious/ Historical	National issues	Election arithmetic	Election scenario
15	8	3	1	1	2

Punjabi Tribune published 15 articles. Out of these one was on national issues, three on historical and religious issues, two on the electoral scenario, and one on the electoral arithmetic. As many as eight articles dealt with the most important current issues before Punjab politics, like agriculture, the employees' problems, water crisis, and other issues concerning the common man. These articles gave voice to the concerns of the common Punjabi people. Many more such articles could and, indeed, should have appeared in the papers, which unfortunately did not happen.

During the crucial days before elections, the vernacular print media clearly failed to sufficiently highlight the major issues, including poverty, water crisis, the collapse of education, and even the controversy surrounding the policies on SEZs. The newspapers, instead, focused only on the polls and the election process itself, paying inadequate attention to really significant issues and to the background and track record of candidates as well as the potential consequences of their policies. Pritam Singh calls such abuse of the media its reduction to a "propaganda weapon" and sees in it "a serious threat to democratic values and institutions" (Singh, 1985).

As the print media becomes increasingly commercialized, it encroaches on the functioning of the "public sphere" as described by Jürgen Habermas. Habermas views "the public sphere [as] an arena of public debate in which issues of general concern can be discussed and opinion formed." (quoted in Giddens, 2001) He warns that "as the public sphere shrinks, there is marked increase in public apathy, a relentless pursuit of economic and material interests and a rising tide of cynicism and social alienation. The collapse of the sphere is therefore a danger to the very core of civil society." (Giddens, 2001) In the context of Punjab, the most disturbing inference, however, is that the media has failed to interrogate the deliberate and systematic lies of the campaigns of contesting candidates, their appalling record in office, or the consequences of five years of previous misrule.

The foregoing study shows that though the print media in Punjab at present seems on the surface to have a diverse structure of ownership, by and large its ownership is private, corporate and oligopolistic. The owners frequently work in tandem with political parties to impose a kind of self-censorship. There are shared mutual interests, including commercial and political. Advertising

revenue and newsprint quota are only two of the more obvious examples of such interests. A close examination of the ownership structure reveals two major problems. First, the owners and editors are often the same persons. Second, an oligopolistic structure keeps the ownership of major newspapers in the hands of a few. This leads to formation of cartels, with the result that the journalists' wages and job security issues are tightly and undemocratically controlled. Consequently, journalists are forced to tow the line drawn by their pay masters.

Unfortunately, there is no independent mechanism at the peoples' level to examine the authenticity of the media's conduct during elections. There are no organized groups to challenge the strategies followed by newspapers. Even after practicing democracy for over six decades, we have failed to develop public forums where politicians and media could be examined thoroughly on their claims, statements and promises. For without adequate information, intelligent debate, or criticism of the establishment, of institutions and parties, democracy is but an ideological phantom, without life or substance (Douglas, 2006). So in this way, media serves a reinforcement function rather than the function of an agent of change (Johal, 1976).

Conclusion

A vigorous democracy requires informed citizens who have the necessary information to participate in political discussions, debates, movements and other activities. If the media does not provide adequate information and an open platform for debating issues of crucial importance, and if it does not help promote informed democratic participation, it fails to fulfill its democratic responsibilities (Douglas, 2006). In the context of what we have explained above, the words of J. M. Balkin, quoted earlier seem absolutely apt.

To remedy this situation, there must be a strengthening of the media reform movement, better recognition of the importance of media politics in the struggle for democratization, continued efforts for a just and equitable society, and greater support for the development of alternative media (Douglas, 2006). It is essential that school curricula should enable young people to become critically engaged with the media culture that surrounds them everywhere. Indeed, media education should not be confined to academically analyzing the media, much less to the exercise of some mechanistic critical viewing skills; it should rather aim at encouraging young people's critical participation as cultural producers and political stakeholders in their own right.

As Habermas (2001) has pointed out if the media is to retain its independence in an increasingly profit-driven world, the state should subsidize the major newspapers and news channels to enable them to stand guard on people's interests against encroachments of unbridled private greed and political manipulation. Habermas's ideas need to be considered seriously in the situation currently prevailing in Punjab.

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