

## **FOREIGN POLICY AND MEDIA: ANALYSIS OF MEDIA COVERAGE DURING P.M. NARENDRA MODI PERIOD**

Manumitra Balaji<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Madhumati Deshpande<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Christ (Deemed to be University), Bangalore

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Christ (Deemed to be University), Bangalore

### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to look into the role media can play in foreign policy and focusses on how media has been a tool for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's public diplomacy and foreign policy initiatives. The first part of the paper is a qualitative analysis of how media has served as a tool for PM Modi and the second part of the paper is a qualitative analysis of the Press reports during PM Modi's visits to foreign countries. The paper attempts to bring out how PM Modi has effectively used various media platforms, for his foreign policy initiatives and for gaining public support. However, the criticism of PM Modi's relation with the media leads to questions which could create different opinions on PM Modi and the media.

### **Introduction**

There was a time when diplomacy used to be conducted behind closed doors without public interference. Most diplomacy still occurs behind the scenes, where the officials hold negotiations privately on crucial and confidential issues. But development in communication and technology has changed diplomacy and public opinion has become an important factor. The relationship between Media and foreign policy has become significant after the advances in communication technology. Media has always been the primary source of information for the people. The media can play an important role in the policy process with its ability to highlight issues and bring out public debates, which shows that media can have influence over different spheres of activity including foreign policy. However, is it possible to establish a link between media and foreign policy? What are the ways in which media can influence foreign policy?

The relationship between Media and foreign policy could be understood with two media theories; the CNN effect and the manufacturing consent theory. In this paper, the dominant ideology model can be considered relevant to the topic of research. This model portrays that media is aligned to economic, social and political interests. It views that the media acts in

interests of the major corporations and media tycoons. Ownership determines the influence. A significant version of this model was developed by Noam Chomsky and Ed Herman called the Manufacturing consent, in the form of 'Propaganda Model' (Heywood, 2007). This model suggests that source of news is from the government and think tanks and it can put pressure on journalists to follow certain orders. This model views that the media can subvert democracy to gain public support for foreign policy goals. Objections to this theory and criticism to this model comes from another theory called the CNN effect.

The CNN effect (first mentioned by scholars like Livingston and Eachus) suggests that media has the power to influence changes in foreign policy (Singh, 2017). In simple words, the former says that media has no independent opinion but is the official viewpoint influenced by authorities, while the latter says media can compel a government to intervene in crisis. But with later evaluations, many policymakers take the view that media can draw attention to an issue, but does not impact the content of the policy (Singh, 2017).

For the most part, Indians are moderately supportive of India's global engagement. Many, however, voice no opinion about such global affairs, again a reminder that for large numbers of Indians living in disparate rural villages or vast urban squatter settlements, international relations are quite removed from the concerns of their daily lives (Stokes, 2016). It is since the 1990s when many changes came in with globalization, that growth of Media became a turning point, bringing information to the public on foreign affairs and playing a key role in foreign policy.

Media can also become a participant in diplomacy. Diplomacy has always depended on communication, requiring governments to communicate with each other or to the public. The media played an active role in Vajpayee's bus initiative to Lahore. The idea that P.M. Vajpayee could travel to Lahore came up during an interview of P.M. Nawaz Shariff with Shekar Gupta, editor of "Indian Express (Dugger, 1999).

When official statements are being made by spokespersons, journalists are present to capture them and these are printed in newspapers, flashed on the news which is important in establishing foreign policy positions with other countries. Media has been quick in flashing news on External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj's statements on Pakistan which are important in projecting foreign policy positions. For example, Sushma Swaraj's statement 'No Cricket Series Till Pakistan Stops Terrorism,' (NDTV, 2018) could show non-cooperation with Pakistan unless it stops all cross-border terrorism and firing.

"While there can be little doubt that media plays a significant role in shaping, influencing foreign policy, it remains questionable whether media can actually lead a government to adopt, modify, or abandon a chosen foreign policy"( Joshi, 2015 cited in Singh,2017) .

However, the extent to which Media influences government policy depends on the strength of the government. A strong government with rational policy can face media storms, weak governments will have a difficult time in facing the Media (Baru, 2009).

### **Media and P.M. Modi**

This paper focusses on how Modi has used the Media as a tool for his foreign policy and as an instrument for his Public Diplomacy. PM Modi has used communication, print, electronic, digital and most popularly the social media platform to establish his foreign policy. Before understanding how it has been an instrument, it is important to understand what is public diplomacy? It was a term coined by Edmund A Gullion, he describes it as “dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy, cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries. Also, governments and leaders use public diplomacy to get foreign policy consensus within the country. A modern day diplomat should be an excellent communicator to project his country’s image and reach out to the public and create a favourable or positive impression. There are many methods, amongst which media is a significant one, and for P.M. Modi, media has been a tool for the purpose.

Modi, who is an excellent communicator, has used his media statements to bring attention to his focus points in the country’s foreign policy. All of his foreign trips since he became a Prime Minister have been widely covered by the media before and after the visit. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) never missed an opportunity to publicise the statements before and after the tour. This helped to create a positive image among the public of India’s relations with other countries. A Indian Express article said “India's foreign policy has become vibrant, assertive” and has formed a unique "Modi Doctrine" (The Indian Express, 2018) a strategy for the rise of India as a great power in the new international scenario. Such reports again create a positive image for Modi through media, making public opinion favour him. There is an official website of Prime Minister ([www.narendramodi.in](http://www.narendramodi.in)) which covers all his foreign visits and initiatives with complete details. P.M. Modi has also used the radio. ‘Mann Ki Baat’ is a radio programme where in PM Modi shares his policy plans with the public. Though the programme mainly concentrates on national issues, on January 27th 2015, Barack Obama was a part of the radio programme (NDTV, 2015), which can create an image of positive Indo-U.S. relations among the public. Along with this, what Modi has used most effectively to be a master of public diplomacy is the social media. The MEA established the public diplomacy division with its own web portal. It has effectively used the social media such as twitter, YouTube, images on Flickr and also a Facebook page. This use of ‘new media’ is to reach target audiences.

Modi has been an active user and has made ingenious use of twitter. As he was taking over as Prime Minister he tweeted about the best wishes he had received from various governments; U.S.

President Obama, Russian President Putin to Japanese premier Shinzo Abe (The Economic Times, 2014), thus beginning with a positive note in relations with the particular countries. This shows how Modi is also using Twitter in projecting his foreign policy, Popularity or his connections with World leaders. As per 2017, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> among the 50 most followed world leaders (Leaders on Social Networks). An urban population which uses technology the most would extend support to him and the support could be seen in terms of comments, likes, shares, retweet etc. Most foreign policy debates played on news channels have only turned out to be 'for' and 'against' arguments, rather than to facilitate consensus (Baru, 2009). This has played a critical role in influencing public opinion on India's Foreign Policy.

Thus with the advancement of technology, and the emergence of varied social media platforms, it has facilitated the sharing of relevant information with the public. Foreign policy, which is not a common political discussion topic among the public has become a household topic. All of Modi's foreign trips and speeches to the Indian Diaspora increased his popularity as it projected him as the leader of Brand New India. It was in stark contrast to the out- going Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's personality. But is this an indication that media was now influencing foreign policy?

Seven media strategies can be listed out being followed by Leaders of Developing countries: buying news space, developing media relations, raising general and specific complaints about the media, applying economic and physical threats, blocking media access, and using testimonies and the Internet (Avraham, 2017), The image of Kazakhstan was perceived to be damaged by British comedian Sacha Baron in the movie 'Borat' (Avraham, 2017) and thus, to restore its image Kazakhstan bought news spaces in the New York Times. Looking into these strategies, one can speculate that the Narendra Modi government has been following similar strategies to deal with the media.

### **Media and Foreign Policy**

In a democracy, the Press is a vital component in foreign policy process. Importance of issues is indicated by communicating it through headlines and front page placement. The press helps in shaping public opinion and this ability makes it a significant medium in determining public opinion on foreign policy issues. The letters to the editor column also allows people to express their views as an assessment of policy initiatives and also in bringing out the expectations of the public from the government.

The theories and arguments discussed above could be understood when applied to media coverage (in the case of this paper, only press reports have been considered) whenever PM Modi

has made foreign visits. Visits to Nepal, Sri Lanka (neighbours) U.S.A and China (influential powers) have been used to get a comprehensive result from the analysis. The purpose of the analysis is to see how the press has turned out to be a tool for Modi's public diplomacy and the role it can play in his foreign policy. Also, the analysis attempts to show how a single event can have different reactions from media of countries involved.

Modi's influence on foreign policy can be analysed at three levels i.e. Press as an Observer, Participant and Catalyst as far as foreign policy events are concerned. Observer role: as defined by Cohen, involves transmission of factual information of events to readers through objective-descriptive reporting. For a qualitative assessment, press as an observer also helps in image projection of a country from news reports. But a limitation here is that it cannot be claimed that findings are definite (Basu, 2013). Participant role: Cohen says the role of press as participant is to act as a critic and advocate certain foreign policy positions (Basu, 2013). Catalyst role: the press here is the medium through which the public reacts to the news with regard to the policies (Basu, 2013). Thus as a catalyst, it stimulates public opinion and provides a platform for public debate. These roles of the Press have been used to bring a comparative analysis of press reports during Modi's foreign visits. For the analysis, visits to Nepal, Sri Lanka, China and the U.S. are used.

## **ANALYSIS OF PRESS REPORTS DURING MODI VISITS**

### **NEPAL**

The Times Of India Report said "Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday wound up his "historic" visit to Nepal with a slew of sops focusing on the 4 Cs — cooperation, connectivity, culture and constitution— to enhance bilateral ties (The Times Of India, 2014). Modi was the first Indian prime minister to visit Nepal in 17 years. On the other hand in Nepal, the ' Nepali Times' report prior to Modi visit read "Modi-fying Indo-Nepal ties" (Jayshi, 2014).The article brought out that not since IK Gujral has India had a prime minister more interested in Nepal, and when it comes to Nepal, there will be speculation and debate on the usual issues that arouse anger in the relations between India and Nepal. The article also points out that working for equal status requires strength, which is easier said than done and moreover, it could attract hostility, from some parts of India. These differences could generate foreign policy debates.

Here, we see how Modi is trying to use media as a tool to promote his Foreign policy towards Nepal. His media statement prior departure, the Report on Times of India on his visit shows he wants to improve bilateral relations with Nepal in major sectors. Press as an observer, image projected of India is firm, determined, open to negotiation. On the other hand, Nepali media creates an image of India as, dominant, speculative or decisive. Press as a participant, projects

India's foreign policy position towards Nepal to be co-operative, while Nepal's media projects Nepal's foreign policy position towards India as suspicious. Press as a catalyst here stimulates public opinion, Indians will support Modi in his Foreign policy towards Nepal, while Nepal citizens would be doubtful and question Nepal's stand towards India.

## SRI LANKA

P.M. Modi's visit to Sri Lanka was on 13-14<sup>th</sup> of March 2015. The Times of India report said "India and Sri Lanka signed four bilateral pacts — agreement on visa, customs, youth development and building Rabindranath Tagore memorial" — during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first tour to the island country (The Times of India, 2015). It also brings out that he spoke on the fishermen's issue between India and Sri Lanka, saying it has both livelihood and humanitarian dimensions and it would take some time to reach a co-operative amicable solution. Modi's visit to Sri Lanka is the first bilateral tour by an Indian Prime Minister since 1987.

On the other hand, prior to Modi visit the 'Tamil guardian' a Sri Lankan news site based in London, published an article in which Sri Lanka's new foreign minister, Mangala Samaraweera said "We didn't really ask for help but India is in the mood to help Sri Lanka" (Tamil Guardian , 2015). Later after the visit on 6<sup>th</sup> August 2015 the Tamil guardian header said 'Sri Lanka's Indophobia'. It read that 'the long-delayed signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between India and Sri Lanka will be "actively opposed" by local entrepreneurs, the Chamber of Young Lankan Entrepreneurs (COYLE) (Tamil Guardian, 2015). The article brings out that COYLE had evidence to show that the CEPA agreement would not be beneficial to Sri Lanka.

Again analysing media reports of both sides, we see how the press projects and promotes his foreign policy towards Sri Lanka. His media statement on the visit shows that he wants to understand the complexities, build economic co-operation and find solutions to the issues. **Press as an observer** here, projects image of India as 'peace loving', Open to negotiation, Humane, and looking for solving the issues between India and Sri Lanka. On the other hand, Sri Lankan media projects an image of India similar to how Nepal's media did, as 'Intruder, deceitful, creating a view that India is using Sri Lanka only to wave off China in the region. Use of the word 'Indophobia' shows the fear of Sri Lanka and that it is suspicious of India's motives. **Press as a participant**, projects India's policy position towards Sri Lanka again to be of co-operation wanting to build stronger ties. While Lankan Media shows its policy position towards India to be speculative and firm when it comes to the fishermen issue with India. **Press as a catalyst** here, similar to Nepal scenario, Indians will support Modi in his foreign policy towards Sri Lanka as it can benefit from trade and also because Indian media projects an Image of India as looking to solve issues, especially with pressure from Tamil Nadu who are since long time wanting to solve

the ethnic issue in Sri Lanka. While Lankan citizens, on the other hand, would question India's true motive and will also support Lanka's firm take on the Fishermen issue.

## **CHINA**

Modi visited China from May 14-16, 2015. The Hindu report on P.M. Modi's visit, the headlines read "Takeaways from Modi's China visit" (The Hindu, 2015) and, it brings out that he has announced many bilateral agreements ranging from finding a political solution to the border issue to strengthening cultural ties. Also, in an opinion piece, in 'China Daily' titled "Time for deeper China-India cooperation," a researcher at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation wrote that Modi's visit "is expected to strengthen ties between the two neighbours and deepen bilateral economic and trade -cooperation" (Changwen, 2015). Media here has again helped Modi to establish his Foreign policy towards China. His media statement and the Hindu report can portray that he has understood the importance of their relationship and the impact it can have. These also show that he is willing to come up with a mutual solution for the long standing border issues and strengthen the cultural ties and economic partnership.

**The Press as an observer** projects India here as open to negotiation, vigilant, a good neighbour and an economic partner. Chinese media on the other hand creates a mixed image of India. The negative reports show India as a trickster and even intruder when it comes to the border issue which came out even during Modi visit. **Press as a participant** here projects India's policy position to be again of co-operation with China. However, Chinese Media advocates a mixed foreign policy position. The Positive reports like the Indian media did also advocate co-operation with India with realizing that India is a major player in the region. The negative reports question Modi's agenda behind co-operation. **Press as a catalyst**, will influence the public to have a positive take on Modi's policy position with China and support him. While in China, as media reports are found to have given out mixed responses, people could either support or criticize the various aspects of Modi's agenda for China.

## **U.S.A.**

In Modi's visit to the U.S. on 25-26<sup>th</sup> June 2017, it was put out that the two leaders will not address a press conference but will issue individual press statements. The Times of India reported that the two leaders are set to hold discussions on a set of "strategically important" issues and the PM will interact with about 20 leading American CEOs followed by an Indian-American community event (The Times of India, 2017). The Hindu' report on the visit said The U.S. trip, which lasted for three days, was "Frankly, one of the most productive of all prime ministerial visits to the United States," said Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar (Desk, 2017).

While in the U.S. The Washington published on June 26 2017, published a piece that analysed how the meeting between the two world leaders could go. It was titled, “Modi’s ‘no frills’ visit to Washington masks a potential minefield’ (Bearak, 2017). It read that Trump has “used speeches on job creation and the Paris climate accords to cast India as an unscrupulous negotiator and a threat to American workers. The article also spoke on the H1-B visa issue, bringing restrictions on foreign workers in the U.S. which will have an impact on India as most of the immigrants in the U.S. being from India. The report here is basically trying to put out that it was a strange time for talks between Trump and Modi. On the other hand, the New York Times published a report with the title ‘With Trump Set to Meet Narendra Modi, Many U.S. Indians Are Hopeful’. It read that Indians in communities like this one have had high hopes for the relationship between the two leaders — both of whom swept to power as media-savvy political outsiders pledging to revive their national economies (Chilkoti, 2017). The report also goes on to include the opinions of Indians living in the U.S. who have varied viewpoints. ‘Yogi Patel, who has lived in the United States for 32 years and is a strong supporter of Mr. Trump, said “Trump is doing the right thing. He’s doing well for U.S. citizens and America,” “And I am from both countries.” While Vasudev Patel said Mr. Trump is “a little bit unpredictable,”

A different result comes out in analysis of Modi visit to the U.S. Press reports in India show that Trump-Modi meet is going to be of strategic importance, most productive and successful. **Press as an observer** projects India as optimistic wanting to negotiate with U.S. and build partnership. However the Media in the U.S. again has brought out mixed views. The positive reports create an image of India as a strategic partner with a need for positive relations given the number of immigrants from India. Negative report does not really create an image as such but questions what Modi would do in his foreign policy towards U.S. Similar to the previous countries, **Press as participant** projects India’s foreign policy position as co-operation with U.S. being the need of the hour. While Media in U.S. also supports co-operation but firm on policies of certain issues. **Press as a catalyst**, Indians will support Modi on his policy towards U.S., while in U.S. the media brings a mixed response. Indians in the U.S. will support Modi while it also shows that there are people who support Trump as well. However among the Americans, media could stimulate the public to support India, while some can be critical of U.S. policy towards India as the personality of Trump becomes a major factor here with many Americans who are critical of Trump.

Though the government does not need public approval for each of its actions, general public approval is necessary in a democracy. Political leaders and governments are always concerned about their image. When a leader travels abroad it is important that his visit is seen as a successful one by the public at home. As seen in the analysis, efforts have been made to project P.M. Modi’s visits as successful ones.



**The findings and interpretation of the analysis:** It can be drawn that PM Modi has effectively used his media statements to gain public support. His use of words in media statements such as ‘co-operation’, ‘strategic partnership’, ‘mutual resolution’ would encourage the public to support his foreign policies. It also projects an image that he is willing to solve concerned issues. In the Indian press reports taken for the analysis, all of them have been positive, again helping P.M. Modi for public approval and projecting his foreign policies. Thus, findings from the analysis, show that media has effectively served as a tool for P.M. Modi’s Public Diplomacy and has been a significant instrument of his foreign policy initiatives. However, the analysis also brings out that media can bring up certain issues of certain policies and thus could bear a negative impact on the image of the government. Therefore governments make efforts to project its policies in a positive manner. This can be better understood by looking into the criticisms of P.M. Modi’s relation with the media.

## **CRITICISMS**

The MEA has traditionally maintained contacts with influential editors. But with the rise of 24/7 news channels and the digital media, the governments influence has been declining (Baru, 2009). Despite the efforts of P.M. Modi, there are criticisms that have come out on the relationship between Media and Modi, through media itself. On Modi’s media policy on the **foreign policy front**, there has been criticism on both International and Indian media through online news websites, digital newspapers, posts on social Media. On, **International Media** for instance there was a twitter debate sparked by a Washington Post journalist hinting that P.R. firms working for the Modi government were trying to influence the foreign media, which created a viral trend called #ModiMediaGate (International Business Times, 2015).

However, it is on P.M. Modi’s media policy within India (Domestic front), where there have been criticisms, widely covered by the international media. For example, an article was published in Asia Times with the headline “How Modi subverts, starves and saturates the media” (Parikh, 2017) criticising the Modi government for amplifying its policies and side-lining the critics and thus P.M. Modi filling India with positive imagery. Corporate control over the media is a major problem from the simple fact that owners have the power to control the content of what media produces. There is corporate ownership of media around the world and even India has fallen in the same trap.

An American news publication has criticised the corporate overlords in Indian media inclining to be pro-Modi business magnates by giving an example of how Network 18 (which includes leading TV channels, Forbes India magazine, and Firstpost.com), owned by Mukesh Ambani, shifted coverage to the right wing (Khan, 2014). Reports have brought out that India which ranked 130 out of 180 in the world press freedom index declined to 138 (Reporters Without

Borders, 2018) , leading to rise of self-censorship within the mainstream media as journalists are becoming targets for the nationalists. In addition, with the growth of new media in India, there have been critical articles, viewpoints in **Indian media** platforms also. **On foreign policy front**, a digital newspaper criticised Indian media for not covering the complete story during P.M. Modi visit to the U.S (The Citizen, 2014). The Outlook magazine produced an called “Me-First, The Core Of Modi Doctrine Of Foreign Policy, Damaging For India?” (Swain, 2017), bringing out that regardless of doubts and criticisms on international media, a usual reference of Modi’s foreign policy is that he has already taken India to great heights in the International arena. **On domestic front**, surprisingly, the Financial Express published an article on P.M. Modi avoiding the media (Financial Express, 2017) emphasizing that there is no complete denial that P.M. Modi does not meet media persons, but engages only with those inclined towards BJP.

Thus analysing the criticisms, we see that there are critical reports by International as well as Indian media on media policy of Modi on both foreign policy front and domestic front. But on the foreign policy front, international media coverage is minimal, while largely covering the domestic front. However, within Indian media most of such articles are not covered by the mainstream media (Press). An answer to this could be found on an article produced by Reuters, criticising that under the Modi government, journalists fear writing against P.M. Modi or the BJP (Gopalakrishnan, 2017). The article gives examples of many journalists who have resigned, threatened and been abused on social media after writing critical reports. Ravish Kumar, a news anchor for NDTV’S Hindi language channel said he has been constantly threatened by pro-government activists. Gauri Lankesh, a secularist and critic of right wing ideology was murdered and a member of a Hindu group (Hindu Yuva Sena) was arrested. A significant factor where India lags behind is foreign coverage and posting of foreign correspondents. While China has emerged as India’s largest trade partner and is India’s biggest neighbour, only three media organisations (one subsidised by the government) have correspondents stationed in China (Baru, 2009).

## CONCLUSION

Media and P.M. Modi: a tool for his public diplomacy and foreign policy is an important topic to be looked upon, as media has turned out to be an important factor in foreign policy process and public diplomacy. Media has a crucial role in giving information to the public and bringing up debates and discussions. The two important media theories differ on its impact on foreign policy. Communication has been the key for media to be a participant in diplomacy. The main focus of the paper is on P.M. Modi’s relations with the media. The print, digital, and social media platform, with the addition of his media statements, has served as a significant tool for his foreign policy and in reforming his public diplomacy.

The paper attempts to answer how the media has served as a tool, but what remains questionable is the ability of media in influencing the content of policy. Though the Prime Minister does not need public approval for all his policies, in a democracy, public support is necessary and key to creating a positive image of the country in the international arena. The second part of the paper makes a comparative analysis of press reports bringing out that all of them have been positive, helping in creating a positive image of Modi's foreign policy, and on the whole, of the country for the public within India and in the foreign countries.

However, the paper also looks into the criticism of P.M. Modi's relations with the media. On the foreign policy front, the criticisms have been minimal, while on the domestic front, both international and the Indian media platforms have largely covered them. With the growth of democracy, the free media can rule out propaganda and manipulation and thus the governments have come up with new techniques to shape news. Favourable presentation of news and policies is come to be known as 'spin' (Heywood, 2007).It ensures control over sources of information so that only the official position or standpoint is presented. This can be seen as a threat to democracy as it allows for manipulation of news and information strengthening the image of the government.

A probable solution for the criticisms could be a uniform media policy to ensure that the influence of political parties is not transcended through media reporting and business transparency to ensure that corporate owners do not create biased news. But the criticism leads to questions such as, does PM Modi have control over the media? Or largely, whether political parties exercise control over the content of media?

According Habermas, public opinion can exert a soft pressure on the malleable shape of minds and this is political influence. The concept of Media power suggest that; those who work in politically relevant sectors of the media such as reporters, editors, publishers can exert power as they can select and project politically relevant content (Habermas, 2006). Media power is one of the cons of political communication. Owners of various forms of media can covert media power into political influence and public pressure. Thus it is important for this media power to be self-regulated. A self-regulating media is what is necessary for the sustenance of democracy and empowered citizens who do not degenerate into the colonizing mode of communication.

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