Research Article

Ideological Narratives in CNN's Coverage of the Indian General Elections: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Elections of the world's largest democracy, India, inevitably attract global media attention due to its potential to shape the future of 1.4 billion Indians. The latest 2024 Indian Lower House elections thus received extensive coverage by Western media outlets, among which the American organisation, Cable News Network (CNN), is one of the most renowned. The current study critically examines the coverage of the 2024 Indian General elections by taking CNN as a sample. It focuses on how its coverage differentiates between India's national political parties. Using Cormack's five indicators of Ideological Critique, i.e., Content, Structure, Style, Mode of Address and Absence, this research analyses CNN's website content from the announcement of Indian election dates to the Prime Minister's swearing-in ceremony. The findings from the ideological critique highlight the lacunae in CNN's reporting, reflected through their selection of news stories and sources, the presentation of interpretations, the structuring of information, the approach to addressing issues, and notable omissions of relevant facts. By doing so, the research unravels the ideological lens through which this renowned American media house views and represents Indian politics.

INTRODUCTION

It's no surprise that the global media keeps a close eye on India's General Elections, given their potential to shape the future of nearly 1.4 billion people, almost one-fifth of the world's population. It is crucial that the important matters, such as a country's elections, remain unaffected by external interference. A study suggests that between 1960 and 2006, foreign powers attempted to sway the election results of 66 countries (Corstange & Marinov, 2012). The media is one of the sharpest weapons to point at the desired targets. For a long time, international media institutions have been consistently accused of exerting influence on the electoral battles of other countries. The advancements in digital media and the emergence of global audiences have streamlined the process through the faster and instant dissemination of information (Kumar, Raj, & Kumar, 2021).

The growth of any country may affect the established economic equation of the world, and in such a situation, as an instrument of soft power, the media can be utilised in a way that can affect the democratic process. India receives extensive global coverage due to factors such as its rising status as an economic powerhouse (Thussu, 2013), alongside its global political influence and recent scientific breakthroughs. Apart from this, the internal political dissonance in the country also opens the gate for the international media to pave its way towards exerting influence and interference.

It is no wonder that, directly or indirectly, the media shapes narratives and frames the public's understanding of events (Trunfio, 2020). While global media often claims to adhere to the fundamental values of objectivity and balance, their coverage of Indian political issues tends to be marked by scepticism. Many important voices in

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India and abroad are challenging their intent, arguing that such representations often lack nuance, lean towards sensationalism, and foster negative stereotypes about the country. India's Minister of External Affairs, S. Jaishankar, has addressed this concern by satirically criticising the Western media's "perceived involvement in India's internal affairs, for they see themselves as major participants in Indian elections and feel compelled to interfere" ("Western Media", 2024). The issue, in fact, is not a recent one. Longstanding debates have surrounded the asymmetrical structure of international news flows from the dominant Global North towards the Global South. The New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) was the result of this wide discussion held on the prominent stage of UNESCO in 1980. The Western news wires were accused of running an agenda and presenting a skewed image of the developing world (Paterson and Sreberny, 2004). NWICO aimed to address these critiques of the Western media (MacBride, 1980).

Given a substantial Indian audience that subscribes to media networks outside, it is crucial to monitor how these networks influence the affairs inside. Election coverage, in particular, is a sensitive domain, as media narratives have the potential to affect voters' decisions. Despite being a subject of critical analysis, there is a notable lack of comprehensive work done on the concerned issue. While there are studies on global (especially American) media coverage of India (Johnston, 1983; Mishra, 2012; Pinkerton, 2008), there is a potential lack of works touching upon the subject of elections. Hence, this study aims to fill the gap by closely examining the strategies employed by American media in the coverage of political events in Indian elections. For this purpose, the American media house, Cable News Network (CNN), is specifically selected.

Established in 1980, CNN was the world's first twenty-four-hour cable television news channel, making it a significant player in global news dissemination (Hughes, 2004). Today, CNN's online network also ranks among the leading sources in global news and information delivery. Despite these feathers in CNN's cap, it has earned controversy while covering major events, including the Iran-Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The research aims to determine whether such controversies are true with respect to India.

Literature Review

In major events, such as elections, citizens keenly observe how their country is portrayed on the world stage. This interest may stem from two common reasons: people's trust in the reliability of foreign media or suspicion of their bias. Several studies have demonstrated that Western media institutions hold a highly influential position and have a huge impact on people in non-Western countries. These scholarly studies reveal repetitive patterns of Western media dominance. For instance, Singh (2018) analysed the framing of Arab conflicts by India's NDTV 24*7 and CNN-IBN in 2011. The results revealed a dominance of Western perspectives, particularly on CNN-IBN, which is more closely aligned with CNN's narratives.

Groshek (2008) further explored how CNN and CNN International set global news agendas. The common findings suggest that both networks consistently inform American and non-American audiences on what to think; the difference lies only in the presentation and focus of issues. The case reflects the network's agenda-setting power across borders. Contrasting these findings, McNelly and Izcaray (1986) suggested that international news exposure alone might not shape people's perceptions, but other factors, such as news exposure, knowledge, and demographics, including age, sex, education, and living standards, also play a role.

The Western media has been mostly on the radar in India, and many research works have highlighted its asymmetrical portrayal of the country. Pinkerton's (2008) study concluded that the BBC's post-independence broadcasts exhibited bias against India, which was particularly evident through its coverage of conflicts with Pakistan, especially on the Kashmir issue. The negative portrayal of Indian society was seen as a form of imperialism that had direct implications on the global perception of India. The study by Riffe and Shaw (1982) analysed the coverage of Third World countries in The New York Times and The Chicago Tribune from 1970 to 1979. The findings reflected their persistent focus on highlighting the political instabilities in the countries of the Third World. Mishra (2012) suggested similar tendencies in the Western media's coverage of the 2010 Commonwealth Games in India, which predominantly focused on issues of mismanagement and a lack of game preparedness. The coverage highlighted the social, economic and cultural problems in India, undermining all the accomplishments.

Apart from this, research is also available on the representation of Indian elections, but only within the Indian media landscape. Chattopadhyay (2012) examined the transformation of the media landscape in India from traditional to online, exploring how digital tools influence election outcomes. The content analysis by Mudgal (2015) revealed that prime-time news bulletins during the 2014 Indian election campaign prioritised coverage of star campaigners and ticket distribution, while ignoring discussions on developmental issues. Jha's (2020) analysis of news coverage from the 2019 parliamentary elections noted that Indian prime-time channels preferred opinion-based content and sensationalism over ground reporting. The media, both domestic and international, influences voters' decisions during elections. While existing studies provide insights into domestic media practices during Indian national elections, there is a lack of research examining how Western media represent these electoral

events, despite their active and sustained involvement in India's election coverage.

Methodologically, the current study draws upon Cormack's method of Ideological Critique, which is well utilised in the papers of Brennen and Duffy (2003) and Wolf (2008) to analyse media representations. Brennen and Duffy (2003) analysed the articles of the New York Times to compare the portrayal of Japanese-Americans post-Pearl Harbor and Muslim and Arab-Americans post-9/11 to show how ideology impacts news coverage and shapes public perception. Similarly, Wolf (2008) examined the portrayal of racial tensions in the New York Times and Le Monde's coverage of Hurricane Katrina and the 2005 social unrest in France. Both studies demonstrated ideological biases in media content in favour of the country to which that media belongs.

By applying this framework to CNN's coverage of the Indian General elections, the study systematically analyses how this American news network constructs the narrative of Indian democracy during its most consequential political moment. Although this framework of Ideological critique is used to examine media representations of race, conflict, and national identity, its application to the analysis of Western media's coverage of India's party politics during elections has not been done. So, there also remains a methodological gap.

Research Objectives

- To explore the website content of CNN, related to the political stories during the Indian General Elections, 2024.
- To compare the portrayal of the ruling and opposition parties in CNN's 2024 Indian election stories.
- To analyse the strategies used by CNN to build the ideological narratives in its coverage of the issue.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design, where the method of textual analysis is used to analyse the Cable News Network's (CNN) coverage of Indian political parties during the 2024 parliamentary elections in India. CNN, as an institution, holds an important position within global media flows. It has earned its unique status as the world's first 24-hour news channel (Napoli, 2020). Today, CNN occupies a special space in the American media club. Its wide international reach and role in global geopolitics make it an appropriate case for examining transnational representations of Indian democracy. However, the organisation's coverage is often questioned not only in India but also in the USA under Trump's administration. Being a case that remains in controversy over party-based bias in the USA, the researcher attempts to examine whether the case persists with respect to India.

The stories related to the Indian parliamentary elections are collected from CNN's official website by searching for the keyword 'Indian elections.' The study tracks the coverage for approximately three months (87 days, to be specific), right from the announcement of election dates on March 16, 2024, through the seven phases of voting (April 19 to June 1) and up to the final coverage on June 10 of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's swearing-in ceremony. This time frame was selected to capture the entire electoral cycle, showing how CNN covered the national political parties' campaigning and agendas, the voting days, Mr. Modi's re-election, and the rival parties' stands. The textual analysis of stories falling within the defined time frame and category is finally conducted using Michael J. Cormack's method of Ideological Critique, which involves five categories of analysis to understand the ideology underlying the text: Content, Structure, Style, Mode of Address, and Absence.

Cormack's five indicators to understand ideology

Ideology encompasses a set of ideas that influence how people interpret the world and assign meaning to it as per their dominant beliefs (Brennen, 2013). Many of the dominant ideologies seem natural to us, as we often perceive them as rationally thought out and ethically right. In fact, it is influenced by our culture and hence is difficult to detect (Kracauer, 1952). Cormack's method provides a systematic approach to uncovering the ideologies embedded within texts and offers insights into understanding how stories are told and arguments are made.

Content

The content entails looking at what is clearly visible, like the actions, events, people and opinions. This category allows for the evaluation of language and vocabulary, as well as the portrayal of characters (such as political leaders, industrialists, actors, and quoted sources, etc). Analysing the content helps the researchers determine what the text prioritises, criticises and allows to exist as 'truth.'

Structure

This involves understanding the narrative flow and how information is organised and presented. The placement of information plays a crucial role. For example, how the story begins, what is presented in the middle, and what elements are emphasised in the end, as well as the relationship between the opening and closing sections. The introduction sets the tone, while the ending leaves a lasting impression. So, the agenda is usually set in this order.

Absence

Absence refers to the elements that are expected to be included but are not. This category aims to identify the missing elements in the story, like the absence of certain voices, perspectives, and facts, to reinforce a particular perception. Why are some stories or perspectives left out? Absence may be accidental or deliberate. What a text leaves out is as significant as what it includes.

Style

Style examines the tone, visual aesthetics, or imagery, etc. Visual aesthetics encompass non-linguistic elements, including graphics, colours, space, pictures, graphs, and figures. Additionally, the length of the story, the visual appearance of paragraphs, the use of hyperlinks, and other elements are part of this category.

Mode of Address

'Mode of address' refers to whether an issue is addressed directly or indirectly. Moreover, 'who' is addressing the issue also makes sense, as the ideological leanings and image of the person also matter.

Each article in the corpus is systematically analysed according to these five categories, because ideology can only be understood by delving deep into the meaning of texts. Cormack's framework helps to examine both visible and hidden ideological formations.

Discussion and Findings

Following Cormack's five categories of analysis, the findings under each category are examined in detail.

Content

The reiterated themes that emerged while analysing CNN's **content** on Indian elections included 'religious polarisation', 'Ram Mandir consecration', 'Modi's campaign speech', 'Arvind Kejriwal's arrest', 'India's economic growth and unemployment', alleged 'erosion of Indian democratic and secular traditions', 'weaponisation of state agencies by BJP', 'Modi's brand of Hindu-nationalism', 'opposition as the saviour of democracy', 'election results as a reality check for Modi', etc.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the central figure, with 57% of headlines centred around him. All those headlines, somewhere, revolved around portraying him as a 'polarising' leader. To exemplify, some of the headlines read, "Popular but polarizing: Hear what Indians say about Modi (CNN, 2024)," "Narendra Modi: India's popular but controversial leader seeking a transformative third term (Mogul, 2024)," "No one is bigger than him: On the campaign trail with India's popular yet divisive leader (Ripley, 2024)," and "India's Modi and his Hindu-nationalist party have another five years in power (McCarthy, 2024)."

In most of the content, the prime minister was depicted as aggressively pursuing a 'Hindu nationalist agenda' through the construction of the Ram Mandir. Apart from this, the revocation of Article 370 and the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) are repeatedly addressed issues in election stories. 'Controversial' was the most commonly used adjective, like the 'controversial Ram Mandir', 'Controversial laws', 'Modi's controversial speech', 'the controversial BJP leader', etc.

Conversely, the opposition parties, particularly the Indian National Congress (INC), were depicted as a counterbalance to the BJP's dominance. The opposition was positioned as the protectors of India's secular and democratic values. While CNN devoted very little attention to evaluating the policy agendas of political leaders/parties within their respective ruling states, it gave undue weight to the statements of those political figures when criticising the Indian Prime Minister.

Although journalistic standards generally avoid heavy adjectives, CNN has used blunt adjectives to describe PM Modi, such as 'Populist but polarising', 'Controversial leader', 'Modi Juggernaut', and 'Charismatic but divisive leader'. For the BJP, it attached the labels 'Hindu nationalist BJP', 'Hindu hardliners', 'right-wing extremists', etc. In contrast, the opposition was given neutral descriptors such as 'Political scion Rahul Gandhi', 'Regional heavyweights like Mamata Banerjee and MK Stalin', 'Son of the famed Gandhi dynasty, Rahul Gandhi', etc. In the final stories after the announcement of the election results, Narendra Modi is portrayed as being under pressure to 'forcefully' run a coalition government, alleging that the results shattered 'his desire to hold power singlehandedly.'

Another trend observed in CNN's coverage is the extensive use of vague verbs/adverbs like 'many criticised him', 'many said', or 'analysts say', without specifying who and how many these sources are. The sources were distinguished based on their stance towards the Prime Minister. Voices critical of Narendra Modi were labelled as 'analysts' or 'experts,' lending an air of authority and neutrality, while those with positive views were referred to as 'Modi's supporters' or 'devoted followers.'

CNN's selection of analysts also reflected a one-way selection. The majority of those interviewed were unannounced but known Modi critics like Saba Naqvi (Author of 'The Saffron Storm: From Vajpayee to Modi'), Christophe Jaffrelot, Sreenivasan Jain (Author of 'Love Jihad and Other Fictions'), Rana Ayyub and Barkha Dutt, among others, whose one-sided views were featured. The majority of the stories centred on Narendra Modi, with statements in support of him primarily sourced from campaign rallies, creating the perception that his devotees worship him. CNN has also iterated that 'Modi had chosen Varanasi as his electoral constituency due to its status as a Hindu spiritual centre where he can smoothly carry out his religious ambitions.' Overall, the content lacked newness. 'Hindu nationalism' was a reiterated word in 89% of stories. Instead of discussing political policies, manifestos, and developmental agendas, the coverage heavily emphasised the religious angle.

The patterns observed at the level of content can be interpreted through the framework of Agenda-Setting Theory. The agenda lies in the selection and prioritisation of content and voices attributed. As the theory states, the media not only tell people what to think, but also influence what they think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), meaning that if particular issues and voices are given special salience, they dominate the narrative, and the audience

begins to think about them and interpret in that direction. In the context of CNN's election coverage, the overemphasis on conflict-ridden issues reflects the classic agenda-setting function.

Structure

The stories by CNN concerning Indian elections were differentiated as news reports and interpretation-based articles. However, both were found to contain similar issues. The news articles typically focused on current events and usually opened with a highlight of the likelihood that PM Modi would secure a rare third term. While the news articles opened by following the main theme of the headline, the narrative subtly shifted from the third or fourth paragraph, where it began calling India 'divided', Modi 'polarised', and secularism 'destroyed.' According to Mike Cormack, the opening paragraphs of a text usually set an agenda for how the rest of the story will be interpreted (Brennen, 2013). The opening sections of the CNN's narratives, beginning with headlines, used such harsh descriptors for the Indian Prime Minister and the Indian democracy to move the narrative in the direction that Indian democracy and the social system are under threat in Mr. Modi's administration.

These openings set a tone that positioned Modi and the BJP at the centre of the narrative. For instance, a piece on Arvind Kejriwal's arrest opened by framing the event as a government conspiracy. This opening moved the rest of the story toward the 'political motivation' behind the action. Similarly, the post-result reports began by calling the outcome a 'shock' for Narendra Modi. On the other hand, the interpretation-based pieces delved deeper. They incorporated historical accounts, opinions and interviews, along with CNN's own commentary. Although their content was similar to news reports, they didn't rely on current events and usually began with claims about rising 'Islamophobia' in India.

The middle sections of both news and interpretations followed a similar pattern. It compiled all the issues during Modi's tenure from CNN's perspective. It was in this section that the historical events, along with issues like 'unemployment', 'weaponisation of government agencies', 'marginalisation of Muslims', etc., were highlighted. This section mainly featured comments from political analysts and opposition critics who served as references for major claims against the BJP and Mr. Modi. The narrative also frequently captured the voices, mostly from Muslims. s

A common structure was observed, where positive achievements of the Prime Minister's term were paired with negative ones. For instance, while mentioning India's economic, scientific and technological advancements, instant contradictions were presented. Positive development remarks always ended with words like 'but' or 'yet' and continued with criticisms. For example, 'Modi's decade has brought India closer to global power status, 'but' religious polarisation has increased.' Every

story highlighted the religious angle. Before the election results, the stories highlighted Modi's probability of being re-elected. However, after the results, the narrative shifted to blaming Modi's 'Hindu nationalist agenda' for the loss of his one-party dominance, especially by highlighting the results of Ayodhya.

The conclusion section also had a similar narrative structure across both news and analysis formats. The final three paragraphs often featured the voices of opposition leaders on the alleged threat to India's democratic and secular future under Modi's leadership. The analysis articles often ended with a remark on the role of opposition in challenging 'Modi's authoritarianism.' This pattern was also evident in the video content. From providing on-ground coverage of Modi's constituency to following his campaigning and interviewing critics, the videos tend to be more analytical. For instance, one video opened with a CNN reporter's visit to Varanasi, followed by interviews, especially with Muslims, and concluded with a dominant narrative that 'Muslims fear in Modi's constituency.'

Overall, CNN's coverage of the Indian elections followed a structured approach: beginning with the current political context, then delving into the controversies, and concluding with critics' remarks.

Absence

In the political news on elections, generally, the expectations are to see the conventional topics like campaign strategies, major issues in leaders' constituencies, candidate profiles, public opinion and concerns, party manifestos, and discussions of key issues like the economy, healthcare, corruption, social problems, inflation, etc. However, CNN's coverage largely concentrated on religious issues in India and overlooked other significant matters apart from broadly referencing unemployment and poverty. As far as the discussions on electoral constituencies are concerned, the network's reporting was confined to Varanasi, Mr. Modi's Lok Sabha constituency. No attention was given to the electoral constituencies of other major political leaders from either the ruling or the opposition parties. This selective concentration represents an event of editorial omission, as the core dimensions of electoral politics and procedures are minimally addressed or absent.

Similar omissions were observed in the representation of historical accounts, like the coverage of the Ram Mandir story. While constantly writing that 'the Ram Mandir was built on the site of a razed mosque', CNN's stories neglected to mention the fact about the existence of a centuries-old Hindu temple. They did not elaborate on the Hon'ble Supreme Court's detailed reasoning on the case, including references to archaeological evidence acknowledged in the Apex Court's verdict. The absence of key details constitutes a pattern of editorial omission; however, a deeper analysis leads to the inference that this selective absence of legal and institutional contexts gives the issue a different turn. CNN's narrative made the issue appear as if India's

Prime Minister ordered the construction of a temple on the site of a demolished structure to gain votes ahead of elections. The facts remain that the power to interpret the country's law rests with the judiciary. Keeping in mind the upliftment of minorities in India, the court allotted nearly twice as much land to the Mosque (5 acres) as to the temple (2.77 acres). From the analytical inference, it can be drawn that this detail is nowhere mentioned. The concern is that all the interpretations and commentary are embedded throughout a straight news report, rather than labelling it as an opinion or analysis piece.

A comparable pattern can be seen in the reporting of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's arrest. While the arrest was made with the court's order, CNN's coverage only emphasised the opposition's claim that the action was 'politically motivated.' Instead of providing any procedural details, such as the sequence of the Enforcement Directorate's (ED) summons to Mr. Kejriwal, the court's authorisation, and in fact, the details of the accusations made against him, CNN only focused on the critics' and opposition's statements where the BJP was accused of conspiracy against the Aam Aadmi Party's leader. The news stories whose primary focus was on election updates demonstrated a consistent pattern of omitting topics relevant to electoral politics. This again constitutes an editorial omission.

In another instance, CNN covered the Allahabad High Court's decision of striking down a law that permits the Indian government to fund madrasas. CNN linked the court's verdict to elections, establishing its connection with the laws passed by the BJP. In this story, CNN drew a comparison between the Madrasa Act and the Gurukul system. However, based on facts, it can be analytically inferred that Gurukuls have no equal standing to Madrasas, as they operate independently of state funding. So the comparison here makes little sense. Through ideological analysis, it is found that the majority of judicial decisions were misrepresented as political manoeuvres.

Furthermore, an editorial omission is evident in CNN's selection of statements to include in its narratives. They gave past references to the statements made by ruling party leaders on the Muslims, but neglected statements of a similar nature made against Hindus in the past by leaders like Mamata Banerjee and Udhayanidhi Stalin (The Hindu, 2023). The minority representation by this American media house only remained focused on Muslims and failed to include the perspectives of other constitutionally recognised minorities in India, including Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Jains and Zoroastrians (Parsis). Analytically, this asymmetry reflects the ideology of presenting the communal tensions as unidirectional. Thus, the category of absence not only tells what is excluded, but also what meanings such exclusions structure. Due to such absences, many important issues and perspectives get displaced from the hierarchy of relevance, and the audiences are less likely to think in that direction. Here comes the agenda-setting function that displaces the counterbalancing elements so that perception can only be built around what is shown.

Style

As the current study analysed the website content of CNN, the style elements included understanding the audio-visuals, hyperlinks, illustrations, etc. CNN has strategically utilised the hyperlinks on terms such as 'Narendra Modi', 'marginalisation of Muslims', 'divisive rhetoric', 'hate speech', 'largest democracy', 'Ram Mandir inauguration', etc., directing viewers to similar stories that carried criticisms of Modi. However, CNN has effectively utilised illustrations to explain the electoral process, voting phases, and voter turnout. The visual look is the website's strength. Yet, it used a distorted map of India that excluded Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, depicting them as territories of Pakistan and China.

The presentation style frequently incorporated visual elements. However, some 4-5 videos were repeatedly incorporated across several stories, regardless of whether they were related or unrelated to the main narrative. For instance, a reporting video from Varanasi appeared in multiple stories, diverting attention from the original theme.

Mode of Address

Along with quoting analysts, experts, and opposition leaders, CNN also gave its own commentary on several issues. It was observed that CNN consistently contradicted statements made by BJP leaders, either through direct criticism or by quoting the opposition's views. For example, when a BJP spokesman said, 'No political party in the country is strong enough to bulldoze the constitution,' CNN contradicted, 'Muslims' own buildings are being bulldozed in the name of illegal construction.' Questioning, criticising, and commenting are intrinsic functions of media, but when they are done only in one direction while following the claims of one political side, it raises concern. In this case, the opposition allegations were not just reported but also reinforced by CNN's own commentary in that very direction.

In the audio-visual content, the reporters were also observed asking leading questions during interviews, such as asking the opposition AAP's spokesperson, 'Atishi, do you think you will be arrested?' to questioning a critic, 'How do you see India being divided?' and a Muslim leader, 'How difficult is it for you to fight in court?' The way these questions were addressed carried a prejudice.

CNN also indirectly addressed India's relations with Pakistan through an analyst's comment that held 'Hindu nationalism' responsible for rising tensions with Pakistan due to 'heated BJP rhetoric.' Apart from this, CNN also directly accused that 'Hindu nationalists propagate false narratives against Muslims.' Rather than questioning the system, giving such explicit comments could be seen as a

violation of journalistic ethics. CNN even gave repeated references to historical events, such as the 2002 Gujarat and 1992 Ayodhya riots, in its election stories while including commentaries from the BJP's critics. However, there was little to no space given to the ruling party's perspective.

Conclusion

The current study aims to analyse CNN's coverage of the 2024 Indian Parliamentary elections using Mike Cormack's method of Ideological Critique. The analysis reveals the ideology underneath the content. CNN's overall representation of political parties in Indian elections perpetuates an ideological position that leans towards authoritarianism, religious polarisation, and democratic erosion in India under the ruling government Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). A discernible pattern emerged in which Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP were consistently framed with totalitarian ideology, while the ideological stance towards the opposition parties was neutral, as they were portrayed as corrective forces and custodians of secular-democratic values. The agenda-setting is most evident in the selection of content. As the Agenda-Setting Theory posits that the media does not tell what to think, but what to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), this study identified this pattern at the level of content. In this case, there is a strong prioritisation of issues related to religious identity, particularly Hindu-Muslim conflicts, and the government's alleged 'Hindu-nationalism agenda.' This overemphasis is done at the expense of important discussions on governance, policy agendas, and development. By repeatedly publishing stories on religious controversies and conflicts, the coverage creates an ideology about India as a democracy defined by communal tensions and institutional lapses. Linguistic choices, repetition of specific visuals, selective hyperlinking, and the use of leading questions collectively structured a narrative environment that guided the audience's interpretation toward the dominant ideology. The category of absence proved analytically important. The absence of complete facts, perspectives and voices narrowed down the range of interpretive possibilities for audiences. Putting the main highlight on themes of religious conflicts, weakening of institutions, and opposition-driven allegations of authoritarianism against the BJP and Mr Modi, CNN sidelined other important election updates on policy agendas, governance performance, and other socio-economic issues. Agenda-setting is not only done through what is highlighted, but also through what is excluded. The absence omits certain perspectives through which audiences interpret political events. These findings thus reinforce concerns raised in the NWICO debate and subsequent global media research about asymmetries in international information flows.

Limitations of the Study

The study acknowledges that the analysis is confined to a single media institution. It limits the generalisability of findings across the larger ecosystem of Western news networks. Although CNN holds an important position within these global networks, its editorial practices cannot be assumed to be representative of the entire spectrum of international broadcasters. Furthermore, the research relies only on qualitative textual analysis. While this approach of ideological critique in qualitative analysis allows for in-depth examination beyond surface meanings, it does not measure audience understanding or the impact of such news representations.

Future Research Recommendations

Future research may build on a comparative analysis of a few Western media networks on their coverage of India's internal issues, including elections and other topics. It would help determine whether the observed framing pattern is specific to this particular institution or extends to other international media networks as well. Apart from this, a comparative work could also be done on the analysis of how Western media cover elections in other major democracies of the Global South. It might demonstrate newer or similar patterns and help understand the transnational media narratives. Mixed-method approach could also be used to understand how such media portrayals influence the international perceptions of Indian democracy.

Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

AI Usage Declaration

The researcher has used AI only in a few places to correct grammar. The percentage is below 20%.

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