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MEDIA STINGS AND THE NORMALIZATION OF SCANDAL IN INDIA

Kalyani Chadha

Overview

Even as media systems and journalistic practices vary across diverse national contexts, the coverage of scandal—defined as an action or event regarded as morally or legally wrong—has come to constitute a major focus of journalistic activity globally. Certainly this is true of India, where an emphasis on uncovering “scandals” via sting operations has emerged as a staple of news coverage, notably on television. This chapter—which examines the relationship between media and scandal in India—analyzes both the underlying imperatives and practices associated with this type of coverage and briefly addresses the implications of this development for the country’s news landscape. Broadly, in this chapter I will seek to make the case that, although some initial as well as a few contemporary stings no doubt highlight issues relevant to the public interest, television stings in India have increasingly emerged as an innovation employed by outlets to present sensationalized information primarily aimed at attracting viewers. This has resulted in a normalization of the notion of the “scandal” to the point that it has little meaning. In other words, the constant construction of “scandal” has become a routine mechanism for news organizations to gain a competitive advantage in a financially challenging media landscape. Yet India is by no means singular in this regard. As Just and Crigler (2014, 3) put it, “attention grabbing news helps to maximize audience size and hence the revenues of media outlets.” In fact, such patterns of news coverage that offer viewers scandal-as-news, typically presented via dramatic episodic narratives, have become pervasive globally, primarily due to the growing commercialization of media systems worldwide (Thussu 2007). Arguably, this development necessitates an expansion of the analysis of scandal within the broader journalism studies literature that goes beyond the examination of issues related to the manner in which scandals are covered to an understanding of scandal coverage as an institutional response engendered by the constraints of economic uncertainty and competition that characterize journalism as an organizational field.

A brief history of television media stings in India

The terms “media” and “scandal” are frequently employed in conjunction with one another, no doubt because modern scandals overwhelmingly tend to be “mediated” in nature (Thompson 2000, 51) That is to say they are “event(s) which involve disclosure through the media of
previously hidden and morally disreputable activities, the revelation of which sets in motion a series of further occurrences” (Thompson 2000, 52). Meanwhile, as Tumber and Waisbord (2004, 31) point out, scandals seem to be “recurrent rather than sporadic events” that “have become ubiquitous worldwide,” occurring in “countries with dissimilar political trajectories and practices, economic standards, political cultures and levels of corruption.” As such, scandals, not surprisingly, have emerged as a fundamental locus of contemporary news coverage, one that “sells” and hence enables news organizations to draw in and engage audiences reliably (Thompson 2000). As Elizabeth Bird—who undertook a reception analysis of scandal-related stories—has put it, “scandal sells newspapers and tabloids, keeps people in front of their televisions, and provides endless opportunities for conversation” (Bird 1997, 99). Similarly, Tumber (2004) has made the case that expansive coverage of scandals is underpinned, at least to some degree, by news outlets’ motivation to build and expand audiences. This is certainly true of India where a growing, even endemic, emphasis on the presentation of “scandals,” unearthed through so-called sting operations, has become a defining characteristic of the country’s television news landscape.

From a journalistic perspective however, Indian television’s current focus on scandal is not only of comparatively recent vintage, but also represents a sharp disjuncture in terms of the practices that traditionally defined Indian television news. Indeed, television news—which was wholly controlled by state-run broadcaster Doordarshan until the mid-1990s—historically offered audiences a compilation of anodyne news stories closely monitored by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. Thus even as Indian newspapers (starting in the late 1970s) edged away from a pro-establishment stance—responding to the growing public appetite for news that had developed in the wake of the Post Emergency period—and began reporting on a variety of scandals, television news continued to hew to the party line largely reflecting the views and positions of the government in power. As a result, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the reporting of scandal, including developments uncovered via major investigative undercover operations, remained the exclusive preserve of the print sector. During this period, India witnessed what many regard as its first “sting” operation in 1981, when a reporter for a major English-language daily purchased a tribal woman from a village and brought her to New Delhi to highlight the ongoing trafficking of women from marginalized rural communities. At the same time, other newspapers, such as the Indian Express, the Statesman, and The Hindu, broke numerous stories exposing widespread political corruption including the Bofors scandal where members of the government were accused of receiving illegal kickbacks from a Swedish arms manufacturer.

By the turn of the century however, the relationship between television news and scandal coverage began to shift. This change took place via the emergence of televised sting operations which revealed “transgressive acts” by corrupt politicians and government officials that arguably had significant connotations for the public interest. Dubbed “Operation West End” for the British company the journalists claimed to represent, the first of these transformative television sting operations was carried out by the website Tehelka.com (a Hindi word meaning sensation). Using hidden miniature cameras, journalists from the outlet filmed 34 members of India’s defense establishment (including a minister and government and military officers) “accepting (and often demanding) favours . . . ranging from wads of dirty rupees to visits from nubile prostitutes” from fictitious arms dealers (The Independent 2006). While no television channel was directly involved in carrying out this sting—which was originally released on the Tehelka website as a documentary—soon after the story broke, the privately owned Zee TV purchased the rights to the footage and simultaneously telecast the tape across 15 channels, broadcasting “grainy video snippets” to citizens who were “transfixed by the sight of hands reaching out greedily for stacks of rupees and the sound of loot crinkling as it brushes past hidden microphones” (Dugger 2001).
This scandal was important in that it not only led to the resignation of the Indian defense minister and effectively threw the ruling coalition into disarray, but from a journalistic point of view, it marked both the advent as well as the legitimization of sting-generated scandal as an acceptable form of news on television. And although some media observers decried the tactics used by *Tehelka* reporters, accusing them variously of making unsubstantiated claims, to using prostitutes to entrap members of the military establishment (Ninan 2001), others in the news media acknowledged “that the issue of ethics pales before the sleaze” that the *Tehelka* team “had dug up” (Dugger 2001).

Given the success of this exposé, it was not a surprise that by the mid-2000s sting-based scandal reporting began to emerge as a pervasive feature of the television news landscape in India. Within a five-year period of *Operation West End*, virtually every major news channel had established a so-called undercover news division. Meanwhile, to quote a contemporary news report, “TV ads for storefront journalism schools” began to tout “courses” in how to pull off “devastating sting operations” before mentioning “more traditional skills like the inverted pyramid and video editing” (*The Independent* 2006). As Sundaram (2015) puts it, “following *West End*, established and upcoming television companies quickly added the sting to the prime feature of the nightly broadcast.” A class of “investigators, detectives, and public-interest lawyers emerged as stings were mounted against political parties, individuals, and companies.”

**Media economics and television stings**

Underpinning this expansion was a profound structural shift, namely the overall liberalization and deregulation of the Indian economy. This process began in the early 1990s, when the government under pressure from global financial institutions introduced a process of market-oriented economic reforms (Rao 2010). This turn towards the market directly impacted the broadcast media sector, which was perceived as increasingly attractive by advertisers eager to find venues to reach out to the urban middle class that had begun to develop in the wake of the economic changes (Kohli-Khandekar 2013). Thus in 1991, Hong Kong based STAR TV introduced a package of satellite channels that were transmitted by a growing network of unregulated cable operators to viewers in several cities. This was followed in 1992 by the establishment of Zee TV, which “introduced a cable package focusing more on Hindi language programming and thus expanded cable viewing beyond the narrow confines of the affluent classes” (Derne 2008, 32).

The most fundamental shift related to the broadcast sector, however, came in 1995, when the Indian Supreme Court put an end to the state of regulatory limbo in which satellite channels had been operating and ruled that the airwaves were not the exclusive monopoly of the state. This pronouncement not only effectively ended the government’s hegemony over electronic media but also enabled the exponential growth of national and regional language television channels in the country. While the majority of these new entrants were focused on entertainment, there was nevertheless a considerable increase in the number of news channels, which went from a single state-run channel in 1991 to over 30 in 2005, a mere decade after the Supreme Court decision (Savage 2005).

But while this expansion was widely celebrated—with observers frequently touting India’s growing television market—the reality that the financial foundations of news channels were deeply unstable with large numbers of channels increasingly competing both for the attention of viewers and revenue from advertisers was largely obscured. In fact, between 2001 and 2005, the viewership of news channels only grew by a minuscule 1 percent while their share of the total advertising revenues also remained static at about 10 percent (Saha 2005). Explaining this
situation at the time, a media agency executive made the point that the “number of product categories advertising on this genre” was extremely limited. As he put it, “it’s mainly the automobile or telecom companies, which advertise on news channels. In addition, the ad rates of news channels are under check due to the intense competition among them. This is the reason why the volume of revenues has not grown” (Saha 2005).

Concomitantly, satellite television channels were also constrained by “structural challenges,” namely their lack of control over distribution networks (Mehta 2014, 212). This lack of control—which was a direct result of the proliferation of illegal cable systems that powered much of the early spread of satellite channels—meant that “networks never had full control of their own distribution and therefore lost out on a large chunk of subscription revenues” to cable systems that routinely underreported subscribers (ibid.). As a result, unlike in more developed television markets, Indian television channels found themselves extraordinarily dependent on advertising. Given this situation, it was then hardly surprising that the majority of news channels—under constant pressure to survive within India’s hypercompetitive news market—tried to devise new ways to distinguish themselves from others operating in the same space.

Crucial to such efforts was the televised sting which emerged as an “innovation” in the existing repertoire of journalistic practices. As Ranganathan (2015) points out, 2005 was “easily the year of sting journalism,” when “through hidden cameras that flashed unclear pictures and audio that was often muffled or distorted,” numerous instances of corruption were brought to light. While widespread malfeasance was an open secret in the Indian context, in the sense that its existence was widely taken for granted, sting operations provided concrete and potentially actionable evidence of wrongdoing. During this period, television viewers saw police accepting bribes at a major prison in the capital, members of parliament misusing funds allotted for local development, clerics issuing so-called “fatwas” or decrees for money, and doctors filmed selling infants from hospitals (Ranganathan 2015).

However, the place of the television sting-generated news scandal was truly consolidated following an operation that was carried out by the investigative news website Cobrapost (led by journalist Aniruddha Bahal, a Tehelka co-founder) and aired by a leading Hindi language channel, Aaj Tak. During this operation, 11 members of the Indian parliament were secretly videotaped accepting money in return for raising particular questions during the so-called Parliamentary “Question Hour,” in what came to be known as the “cash-for-questions scam” (Prasad 2005). While the questions themselves were largely nonsensical, they nevertheless revealed that the process by which questions were raised during official debate in the Indian parliament was open to manipulation. The sting eventually led to the guilty MPs being dismissed from their parties—a first in Indian political history.

But whereas these pioneering television stings generally involved exposés centered on issues of public corruption—perhaps because they were initiated by investigative journalists whose goal was “to empower” the citizenry by “exposing democracy’s toxic acreage,” as a one-line manifesto on the Cobrapost website put it—the public attention and viewership that they garnered led to a rapid institutionalization of the practice across news channels in what neo-institutionalists would call mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell 1983). This resulted in a simultaneous explosion in the number of television stings undertaken as well as the types of scandals that came to be highlighted, as channels sought to imitate other outlets who seemed to be benefiting from airing sting-generated scandals.

This proliferation of stings was however marked by a discernible shift in emphasis from so-called “hard” scandals involving “actions and events, occurring at least initially in secret, that entail transgression of certain accepted values, beliefs and moral codes,” (King 2013) to “soft scandals” that focused on so-called “sleaze and slime” (Biswas 2006). During this period,
Indian audiences saw stings focusing on legislators engaging prostitutes and religious leaders propositioning female devotees (Ranganathan 2015) with the trend being best exemplified by the “Casting Couch” scandal where an ageing B-grade Bollywood actor was covertly filmed by a team from India TV—then a newly established 24-hour news channel—demanding sex in return for promising to help promote the career of a young woman pretending to be a struggling actress. But although this operation was attacked by many investigative journalists on the grounds that it “crossed the line,” with Tehelka co-founder Tarun Tejpal asserting that “the rules now are and have always been no private lives...it is only about abuse of public office, abuse of public money” (Reeves 2005), IndiaTV immediately saw a three-fold rise in its viewership, with the channel rising to the top of the weekly ratings (Indiantelevision.com 2005).

In fact, one could plausibly make the case that it was the successful marketing of this sting-produced scandal that led a competing channel LiveIndia TV to broadcast another seemingly explosive sting in 2007 in which a young woman who claimed to be a student at a government-run school in New Delhi said that she had been “filmed in a compromising position” by a female teacher who then blackmailed her into joining a prostitution ring (Economic Times 2007). As one might expect, this sting caused a huge public scandal as parents and other members of the public, especially in the capital, expressed their anger and outrage in the form of violent protests. The teacher who was attacked by a mob was also dismissed from her position and arrested by the police. Within days however, it became clear that the entire sting was a “fake” and that the so-called student was an aspiring journalist hired by a LiveIndia TV reporter who had orchestrated the entire operation in concert with a former business associate of the teacher, who wanted to discredit her (Rediff.com 2007).

Eventually, the sting operation was deemed “defamatory” and “false” by the government which also forced the channel to suspend broadcasting for a month (The Hindu 2007). However, the visceral audience response to the scandal that LiveIndia TV purported to show, combined with ongoing market pressures that were produced by an increase in the number of regional news channels, meant that private news broadcasters felt little compunction in pursuing sensational stings. Consequently, they continued to uncover so-called “scandals” in a fairly classic case of what Robert Entman has called “production bias,” which “grows out of the media’s need to manufacture news that attracts and retains mass audiences” (1990, 49). As Rajat Sharma, CEO of India TV (a leading purveyor of television stings) put it at the time, “Everyone does exposés for TRPs. Everything on television is for that” (Rediff.com 2005).

**Diffusion and normalization of sting-generated scandals**

Over the past decade, as the number of news channels in India has grown exponentially and competition has intensified even further, the “innovation” represented by sting-generated scandals has come to be increasingly “diffused” across Hindi and other regional language news channels. As Rogers (2003) has pointed out, various criteria underpin the potential adoption and diffusion of any innovation. These include: the relative advantage or the degree to which an innovation seems to be better than existing approaches; the compatibility or the degree to which the innovation fits the values and needs of those adopting it; the complexity in terms of its use, trialability, or the possibility of limited introduction; and the observability or the degree to which the results of the innovation can be seen by others. In the case of sting-generated television scandals in India, all of these criteria would seem to be in play, albeit in varying degrees.

Compared to traditional investigative reporting, the majority of stings currently carried out by Indian news channels are relatively simple, typically involving little more than the placement of concealed cameras. For instance, the top hits that come up via a YouTube search of stings on
Indian television include precisely these types of stings that variously purport to show a well-known so-called “Godwoman,” flirting with a male follower during a telephone conversation, a policeman asking a citizen for a bribe as well as the existence of prostitution in what a channel called “high-profile” New Delhi hotels. Usually based on tips, such stings are clearly not complex to undertake and offer a distinct advantage over undercover investigative reporting projects which require experienced reporters as well as the commitment of substantial newsroom resources. At the same time, sting-generated scandals serve a key need of adopters which is to draw in audiences. This is of crucial importance because, even though India’s overall television market is expected to grow at a rate of 15.5 percent to reach $15.2 billion in 2019, the nature of the news marketplace—which is estimated to contain approximately 163 news channels according to a recent industry estimate (Indiantelevision.com 2018)—remains extremely crowded. Moreover, much of this expansion has been funded by business and political groups who have little interest in journalism or news per se and are typically reluctant to make major investments in newsgathering (Chadha & Koliska 2016). At the same time, news channels also have to compete constantly with the ubiquitous general-entertainment channels who, with their popular combination of films, music, and sports offerings, dominate both the ratings as well as the advertising revenues in the Indian context.

In such an environment, sensational sting-generated scandals thus offer an easy path to gaining eyeballs. Additionally, the adoption and diffusion of the sting-as-innovation has been facilitated by the fact that stings can be introduced into channel schedules without needing much by way of investment or prior set-up, with some channels even purchasing “ready-made stings” from so-called free-lancers who “hawk their ‘exposés’ to the highest bidder” (Nivas 2010). But perhaps the single most important factor driving the growth of scandals obtained via sting operations on Indian television is that the benefits of broadcasting such content are readily observable. For instance, India TV’s adoption of the sting-based scandal formula resulted in rapid growth, with the channel’s market share going from 12 to 17 percent within a few weeks in 2007. This increase was visible to the top managers of rival news channels who even “went into a huddle” to see how they could “jointly take steps to curb India TV’s growing popularity” (Bansal 2007). And although nothing came of this effort, other channels learned from the success of the India TV approach—as evidenced by their rapid adoption of similar news practices.

Almost inevitably, the diffusion of sting-based news coverage has simultaneously been accompanied by what would seem to be a normalization of scandal across the televisual landscape with virtually every sting presented as “uncovering” sensational misdeeds within Indian society, typically presented using “dramatic graphics, loud music and special effects, which on American television seem to be reserved mostly for news about war or shootings in schools” (Kumar 2010, 61). In fact, a cursory search of YouTube using the terms “stings, scandal and Indian television” yields well over a million results! And while some contemporary stings no doubt highlight important public interest issues such as Operation MLA which filmed regional politicians seeking so-called “black money” to fund their election campaigns or the Narada channel sting which showed 12 members of the Indian parliament allegedly accepting money “from a decoy businessman in exchange for political favors” (Times of India 2017), the impact of these scandals is blunted by the fact that they are part of an ever expanding news narrative where stings constantly generate new scandals. That is to say, virtually every story obtained via a sting operation is framed as a “scandal” on television, regardless of the potential social and political ramifications of the particular incident. As a result, everything—from instances of so-called match fixing in national cricket games, the “tweaking” of poll data to favor certain parties by so-called independent polling organizations, and cases of corruption involving politicians and other public figures, to cases involving college students moonlighting as escorts or call girls, or
sex scandals involving politicians—is uniformly constructed and presented as a case of “scandal” for television audiences.

Implications of sting-generated scandals for the Indian media landscape

Such homogenization not only creates a sort of false equivalence between scandals but also elides very real differences in their implications for the public interest. Moreover, arguably, it also contributes to the creation of so-called “scandal fatigue” that potentially leads viewers to simply tune out the wall to wall coverage of scandal. Just as people seemingly become inured to spectacles of misery, suffering from what has been termed “compassion fatigue” (Moeller 1999), so it would seem to be the case with televised scandals in the Indian context. That is to say, because scandal is seemingly constantly present and presented it has lost its affective power, becoming routinized not only in the way in which it is presented, but, equally importantly, in the manner in which it is received. Thus whereas early sting-based scandals such as Operation West End struck a nerve among members of the public and resulted in demands for greater accountability, the relentless flow of scandal that currently characterizes television news in India has generally not resulted in similar outrage. As veteran investigative journalist Dilip D’Souza has noted, “crimes and scandals, come at us at a fearful rate . . . the inevitable fallout of this cascade of crime is that a certain ennui sets in . . . with the treadmill of scams, an inability or unwillingness to recognize and feel outrage at these crimes” (2005, 68). Though D’Souza was commenting on the relatively muted public response to major investigations in the print media over a decade ago, a similar and maybe even a stronger case can be made for the impact of sting-based scandals on television news on the creation of what Raymond Williams once called “the culture of distance” (1982).

While audiences receive a flood of news about scandals centered on issues ranging from corruption and crime to sex and sleaze, not only is this coverage ephemeral—with stories appearing and then disappearing rapidly from television screens—but there is little emphasis on follow-up or solutions, even in the case of issues that do have major public interest ramifications. This style of television news coverage, particularly in relation to political issues, results in the “ferment of a culture of pessimism” (Udupa and Chakravartty 2014, 18), which has an impact on the public sphere in that it arguably fosters a sense of political and social alienation. Put differently, the all-scandal-all-the-time orientation potentially reduces citizens’ sense of efficacy, rendering them simultaneously disaffected and disengaged—a deeply problematic state for a country with already limited mechanisms for accountability and redress.

Meanwhile, sting-generated scandals also affect the broader mediascape by acting as both drivers and exemplars of a major trend that characterizes Indian news, namely tabloidization. Highlighting the degree to which news content (especially on vernacular language channels) has become tabloidized, Prannoy Roy, the editorial director of the NDTV network (which has largely avoided sensationalism), pointed to a Hindi news channel where, as he put it, “an anchor, twirled her hair with her forefinger, looked into the camera and said, after the break we will show you a rape” (NDTV 2017). This “encroachment of tabloidized techniques and content” (Hughes 2006, 21), exemplified in sting-based scandals, contributes to the rise of a personalized and sensationalistic news narrative which—even as it makes some news stories more accessible to audiences—nevertheless provides little by way of depth or context. And although this trend is by no means confined to India, it nevertheless poses an especially serious challenge in a country where large segments of the public, including younger viewers, continue to turn regularly to television as a major source of news and information (Indiantelevision.com 2018; Statista 2016).
Media stings

Note

1 This rule does not apply to cases where media organizations are themselves implicated as in the recent case of an operation carried out by the investigative reporting website Cobrapost which showed representatives of 17 media outlets agreeing to carry pro-Hindu coverage for a price.

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