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TV News Coverage of COVID-19: A Study of Viewership Patterns and Audience Preferences in Gujarat, India

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Abstract

Mass media plays an important role amidst public health crisis by disseminating information and news to spread awareness among the masses in order to combat a health emergency. The role of mass media in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is undeniable, as it has been impacting lives across the globe since its advent in December 2019. The current study investigated the role played by TV news channels in India through their unstinted coverage of the pandemic. The study focused on two main objectives. Firstly, it aimed to identify viewership trends and consumption patterns among television news audiences in Gujarat during the lockdown. Secondly, it attempted to study the nature of COVID-19 and its coverage on mainstream private television news channels in India. A survey with 160 television news viewers was conducted in Ahmedabad and Vadodara. The results demonstrated the reach, significance, and impact of television news in the country, especially during a health emergency. Despite the flourishing of digital content and a rise in internet penetration, television remains a trusted and dependable source of information and knowledge for Indian audiences. In light of the effective role played by television during the COVID-19 health crisis, the future would witness its growing scope. Moreover, the opportunities for television to influence the viewers with respect to health-related behaviors and practices, development issues, and larger global concerns would also increase exponentially.

Keywords: COVID-19, lockdown, news channels, pandemic, public health, television

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the globe at an unprecedented scale. All aspects of human life, primarily health and social living along with polity, economy, culture, communication, travel, and interpersonal relations have been adversely affected. Over the past two years, human

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existence has had to cope with the realities of a *new normal.* The term 'new normal' first appeared during the 2008 financial crisis to refer to the dramatic economic, cultural and social transformations that caused precariousness and social unrest, impacting collective perceptions and individual lifestyles. This term has been used again during the COVID-19 pandemic to point out how it has transformed essential aspects of human life (Corpuz, 2021). Coronaviruses (COVs) belong to a large family of viruses, several of which cause respiratory diseases in humans. These diseases range from common cold to rarer diseases, such as the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) (World Health Organization, 2020b). The first case of COVID-19 was reported from Wuhan city, China, in December 2019. Investigations were carried out to find out the original source of the outbreak. A large proportion of the initial cases in late December 2019 and early January 2020 had a direct link with the Huanan wholesale seafood market in Wuhan, where seafood and wild animal species were on sale (Rizun & Strzelecki, 2020). COVID-19 cases started to increase across the world as people from Wuhan travelled to other cities and countries. From 11th March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) as a global pandemic. In the light of COVID-19, the WHO's initial focus was on emergencies and pandemic response by facilitating contributions from general public, individual donors, and corporate partners (World Health Organization, 2020a). Countries all over the world implemented large-scale movement restrictions commonly referred to as 'lockdown' to keep themselves safe from the virus. The Indian government announced a nation-wide lockdown on March 24th, 2020 initially for a period of 21 days (The Economic Times, 2021).

India and COVID-19

The first case of coronavirus recorded in India was that of a young woman from Thrissur (Kerala) studying medicine in Wuhan University (The Times of India, 2020). Even though the initial number of cases in India was low, the Prime Minister called for a nationwide lockdown to control the spread of the virus. "Every state, every district, every lane, and every village will be under lockdown," Prime Minister Modi announced (Pathak, 2020a). Except for essential services such as milk, vegetables, and health, everything came to a standstill. Means of transportation were also shut down as borders of states were sealed. Due to this, migrant laborers across

the country had to march on foot to reach their hometowns (The Indian Express, 2020).

The Epidemic Diseases (Amendment) Ordinance 2020 was passed amending the Epidemic Diseases Act 1897 (enacted in 1897 in response to the Bombay plague) to provide for the control of the spread of severe epidemic disease. The act is based on protection for healthcare personnel combatting epidemic diseases and expanding the powers of the central government to prevent these kinds of diseases in future (PRS Legislative Research, 2020). The initial lockdown was extended up to 31st May 2020 due to increase in cases. The pandemic severely impacted the healthcare system of the country, as India struggled with congested living conditions faced by the urban poor. The country also went through many problems which included shutting down of schools and colleges, the migrant exodus, and a down-spiraling economy. After more than two years into the pandemic; India recovered well from initial challenges by developing COVID vaccines. They also exported vaccines to other countries and ensured that the economy is on a recovery path along with providing welfare support to affected citizens (Babu, 2022).

Role of Television during COVID-19

As discussed above mass media plays a crucial role amidst any public health crisis, since it is a significant purveyor of information-dissemination and awareness. If correct information is not relayed during a public health crisis, the consequences could be dangerous (Elliott & Greenberg, 2022). During the lockdown, when citizens were not allowed to venture outside their homes, real-time information about the pandemic was communicated through various mass media platforms. This helped citizens to learn about the prevailing pandemic situation as well as take steps to stay safe and healthy. Technologically advanced as well as innovative communication strategies were employed during the pandemic. Mobile tracing, geo–tracking, facial recognition, and Arogya Setu mobile application launched by the Government of India are few examples of such technology (Rampal, 2020). Social media platforms turned out to be useful to stay connected, while being physically isolated during the lockdown. These platforms facilitated crowdfunding for those in need of financial assistance, sharing of experiences of being infected, life in quarantine, state of hospitals, and treatments available. Media platforms also emerged as sources of panic and conspiracy theories (Kushner, 2020). Advertising, television viewing (a

40% growth over the pre-Covid period) and digital content consumption, especially on OTT platforms experienced explosive growth (Bajaj, 2020).

Historically, Television (TV) has played its important part in keeping people informed and entertained, especially in post-independent India (Ayedee & Manocha, 2020). At a time when the distribution of newspapers was impacted, owing to their perception as carriers of the virus, news channels became a primary source for audiences. These news channels were used to keep the audiences updated on the pandemic situation. Information about steps taken by the government, movement restriction announcements, messages from different Union Ministries, Chief Minister's offices, and other government notifications were telecasted on TV. Regular updates about the number of COVID cases and the availability of health facilities (both during the first and second wave) were provided on TV. In the initial week of the lockdown, television news channels reported continuously on stocks and goods availability to avoid hoarding and panic while buying. Updates about containment zones, vaccine development, corona warriors, and safety measures, such as sanitizing and social distancing were duly emphasized. TV also became the prime source of entertainment and leisure, as families while being locked up at homes watched TV programmes, such as Ramayan, Mahabharat, Chanakya etc (Press Trust of India, 2020).

Literature Review

Purohit & Mehta (2020) undertook the content analysis of 36 videos (real and animated) used to inform people about safety measures to be taken at the time of COVID-19. Nine constructs of the conceptual model of Emergency Risk Communication (Seeger et al., 2018) were used to analyze 36 videos (on Doordarshan) containing messages relayed by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW). The duration of the study was March 3rd to April 20th, 2020 and visual analysis was carried out using criteria, such as -- timing, duration, language, characters, format, and message content. Andreu Casero-Ripolés (2020), analyzed audiences' news consumption patterns in context of influence of coronavirus, citizen trustworthiness towards media, and their ability to detect fake news. Exploratory analysis was carried out on secondary data (both before and after the COVID outbreak) from Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel. The results demonstrated that news consumption increased during the pandemic as even those who were less interested in news consumed it to be aware of the happenings around them. Moreover, the issues of health

crisis which received limited coverage in legacy media were covered adequately as well.

Gollust et al. (2019) highlighted the importance of TV news to improve public health. They studied the coverage of health-related issues on local news channels in America. It was also concluded that, since local news is frequently watched and caters to a specific geographical location, it must be leveraged to make people aware of public health risks. The authors identified four main functions of TV news in shaping public health policy and practice, such as -- surveillance, interpretation, socialization, and attention merchant. They suggested that health news is not highly covered in TV because of declining audiences, industry changes, increase in political content, lack of attention, and spread of misinformation. The lack of support for health journalism is also a major issue according to them.

Olson et al. (2020) conducted a study on the outbreak of Zika virus during which television news became an important source for communicating threat and efficacy information. They used transcript collection and sampling by transcribing three new evening programs of NBC (National Broadcasting Company), CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System) and ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation), and content analysis to assess the rate of television news that contained threat and efficacy information. The findings indicated that public health communicators must emphasize collective and individual efficacy information, while communicating with the media. Another study conducted by Simonov et al. (2020) measured the persuasive effects of Fox news viewership in the U.S. on social distancing during the early days of the pandemic. The study was carried out to check whether the persuasion effect during coronavirus affected the viewers of Fox News, and led them to defy recommendations by global health experts. Evidence with regard to the effect of Fox News viewership's impact on measures of the incremental propensity was found which recommended people to stay at home during the earliest period of coronavirus in the U.S.

The researchers also reviewed a series of web articles and reports on the subject of the current study. Key themes emerging from the same topic included lack of training in medical journalism in India, misleading news about fake remedies, unconfirmed reports, and conspiracy theories. Ethical concerns during the reportage of a public health crisis and the tendency of the Indian media to divert from the main issue of the pandemic are also among the various themes (Mochish, 2020a). Duella (2013) also points to

the Indian media's limited understanding of public health issues which hampers health related literacy among masses. Hall (2020) discusses the challenges and opportunities faced by Indian media during the pandemic even the viewership of TV news, sports, and entertainment content received a boost. A significant development is the trust and dependence of audiences on local news during a pandemic. A survey conducted by Coronavirus Media Usage Study revealed that more Americans (83%) were tuning into local news over cable (71%) or national networks (78%) during the pandemic. The reasons listed were reliability, trust worthiness interest in local happenings, and events over developments far away (TVB Local Media Marketing Solutions, 2020).

In another research conducted on COVID-19 and media's role in India, Madnani et al. (2020) investigated the impact of COVID-19 on OTT platforms in India and how it has reshaped the consumer content preferences. They found out that the average hours spent on OTT have increased from 0–2 to 2–5 hours during COVID. Aspects around epidemic information, that is, infodemics caused by fake news on social media as well as mainstream media platforms were also studied by those interested in understanding media dynamics during the pandemic in India. Bhattacharya et al. (2021) attempted to understand the nature of panicked social media users in India due to flow of (mis)information during the pandemic. They performed a cross-sectional study on 1075 social media users from India and 29 other countries which revealed an increase in social media usage and a rise in panic among users in India.

Information and knowledge-oriented needs and perceptions of Indians towards COVID-19 were examined in a cross-sectional online survey. The data was collected from above 15-year-olds about demographics, knowledge, perception, and practices towards COVID-19. The results showed that majority of the respondents displayed good knowledge and right practices towards COVID-19. However, a gap persisted between the right knowledge and myths around the pandemic. Exposure to media and social networks was found to address the misconceptions around COVID-19. The study concluded that the main sources for COVID-19 information were television (74.5%) and social media (71.0%) (Narayana et al. 2020). Analysis of fake news emerged as a major research theme to study COVID-19 in the Indian context. Around 119 fake news items circulated on social media in the form of videos, images, and texts which were sampled and

analyzed afterwards. It was concluded that Twitter was the key platform for fake news circulation followed by Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube. The sources of fake news on COVID-19 were media, politicians, celebrities, and motivation for the same came from propaganda, financial incentives, desire for publicity, satire, and defamation (Dineshan & Ramappa, 2021).

Statement of Research Problem

In context of TV news coverage of COVID-19, the current research studies viewership patterns and audience preferences of TV news viewers in Gujarat. Around 160 respondents residing in Ahmedabad and Vadodara aged 18 and above, participated in a survey sharing their TV news viewing preferences during the pandemic. TV news coverage of COVID-19 on two news channels, that is, Republic TV (English) and Aaj Tak (Hindi) from March 25th to May 31st, 2020 (Lockdown 1.0 to 4.0.) was also analyzed. Respondents were quizzed about the kind of content they preferred to watch on TV including sources of information about COVID-19, duration of watching TV news channels before and during the lockdown, and types of TV news followed by them on COVID-19 etc. Data from the Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC) in India demonstrated that the total television consumption in the run up to the lockdown period from the 11th week in 2020 (14th to 20th March) increased by 8%. The viewership of TV news grew from 7% to 21% at the national level in both prime and non-prime times in the 12th week (21st to 27th March). In the 14th week (4th to 10th April), the news genre was up to 219% growth. By the 17th week (25th April to 1st May), TV news and movies continued to witness viewership growth (BARC-Nielsen, 2020). These facts highlight the continued significance of TV news reportage and audiences' dependence on the televised medium during times of national and international crisis.

Significance

A pandemic is a rare event in global history and COVID-19 is an ongoing, contemporary issue impacting human life. Thus, research on COVID-19 and media's role would add to already existing academic knowledge and help to understand the pandemic from a communication dimension. The current study is significant because TV news was a prime source of information during the lockdown and people all over the globe. People specifically in India, relied on TV to stay updated on the pandemic situation as well as devise measures to cope with its devastating effects.

Data in the BARC-Nielsen report ([2020](#)) stands testimony to the growing significance of TV news during the pandemic time. This emerged as a key factor in propelling the researchers towards this study.

Research Questions

The following two main research questions guided the study:

1. What kind of viewership trends and patterns are found with respect to TV news among urban audiences in Gujarat during the lockdown period (in context of COVID-19)?
2. What kind of coverage of COVID-19 was seen on the selected Indian TV news channels during the lockdown period?

Methodology

The current study employed an exploratory and descriptive research design to probe deeper into the issue. Mixed method approach (qualitative and quantitative) was used in order to understand the role played by TV news. A survey questionnaire (made available in both English and Gujarati) was administered to TV news viewers aged 18 and above from Ahmedabad and Vadodara. It consisted of 22 close-ended questions. Simple random sampling technique was used to choose respondents. A Google form was prepared and shared for the purpose of data collection owing to limited access to study participants during the pandemic. For content analysis of news coverage on COVID-19, 40 news videos were sourced from the official YouTube channels of the Republic TV and Aaj Tak. The analysis was carried out using non-probability purposive sampling technique. While the survey provided insights into news consumption patterns and the content analysis led to an understanding about the nature of TV news coverage during the pandemic. Primary data was elicited from the survey, whereas secondary data was derived from content analysis. Prior to data collection, the research tools were validated by two media educators and the questionnaire was pilot tested on ten respondents.

Data Analysis

In terms of gender, age group, and city of residence, the number of respondents was equally distributed. There were equal number of male and female respondents (60 each), from both Ahmedabad and Vadodara (60 respondents from each city) in the age group of 18-35, 36-50, 51-64, 65 years, and above (40 respondents in each age bracket). Out of the 22

questions put to respondents, initial ones dealt with generic TV viewing habits. Questions pertaining to viewing preferences on TV news channels, impact of news channels on COVID-19 related behavior, and emotions experienced while watching news channels during COVID-19 were also included in the survey. A brief analysis of data derived from the survey is discussed below using descriptive statistics.
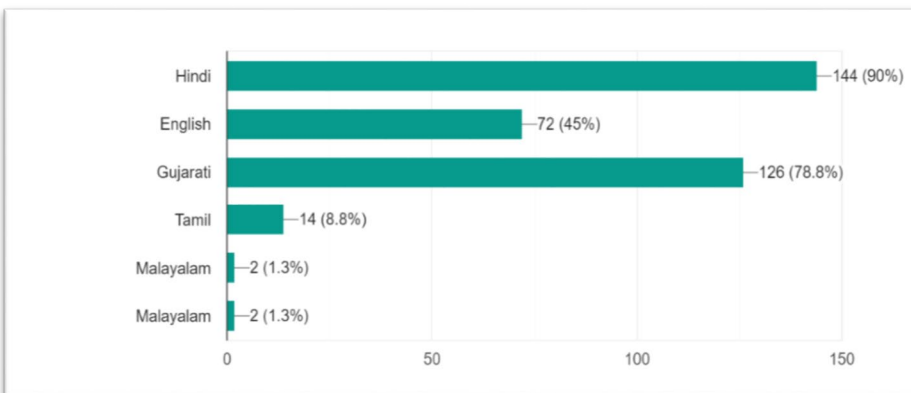
Analysis of Key Responses

Figure 1
Average Viewing Time During the Lockdown
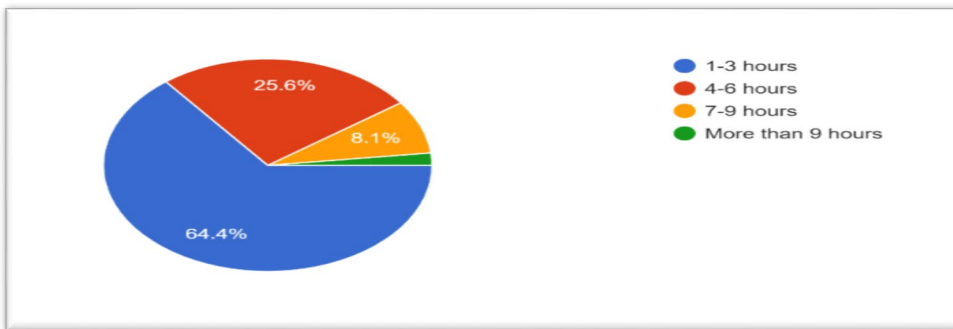
64.4% respondents watched news channels for an average 1-3 hours, 25.6% watched 4-6 hours, and 8.1% watched news channels for 7-9 hours on a daily basis. The ones watching TV news for 7-9 hours during the lockdown were aged 65 years and above.

Figure 2
News Viewing Preferences in Terms of 'Language'

Majority of respondents (90%) watched news channels in Hindi. 78.8% respondents watched news channels in Gujarati, whereas 45% respondents watched English news channels. Thus, respondents preferred regional language news channels over English news channels during the lockdown. This could be due to the focus that regional news channels display local content and news updates that impact viewers immediately.

Figure 3

News Channels Watched During the Lockdown
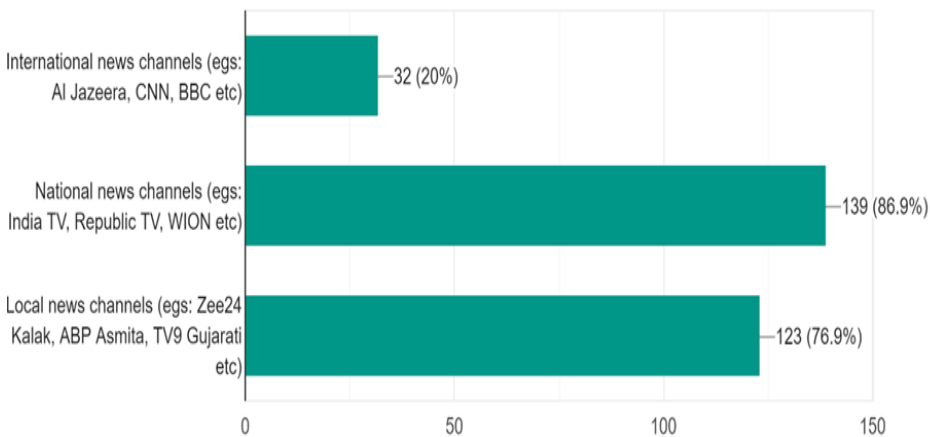
Majority of the respondents, that is, 86.9% watched national news channels followed by 76.9% who followed regional news channels, whereas 20% preferred international news channels. This again, points to the significance of news from one's immediate surroundings during a crucial time, such as the pandemic.

Figure 4 showed that the most watched news channels during the lockdown were – TV9 Gujarati (71.9%), Aaj Tak (62.5%), Zee News (53.8%), and Sandesh TV (51.9%). It can be seen that out of the four most watched news channels during the lockdown, two were regional news channels. This reaffirms the findings discussed earlier.

Figure 5 shows major news follow on TV during lockdown. Respondents chose multiple options. 90.6% respondents followed news about active cases of coronavirus, 85% followed news about imposition of lockdown, and consequences/difficulties faced. However, 73.8% were glued to the Prime Minister's address to the nation at regular intervals

during the pandemic and 66.3% were interested in world news about cases in other countries. Analysis and debates on COVID-19 were the least followed (33.1%). This demonstrates how news that affects viewers on an immediate basis has more followers.

Figure 4
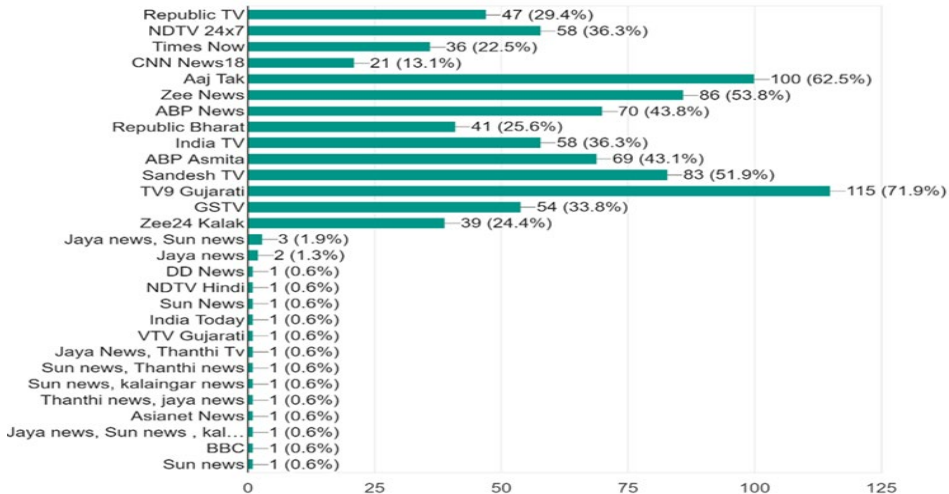
News Channels Watched the Most During the Lockdown

Figure 5

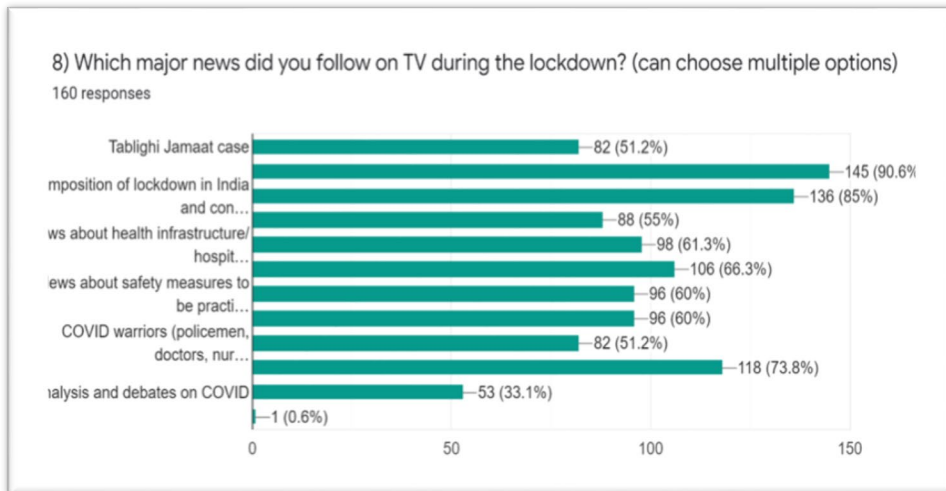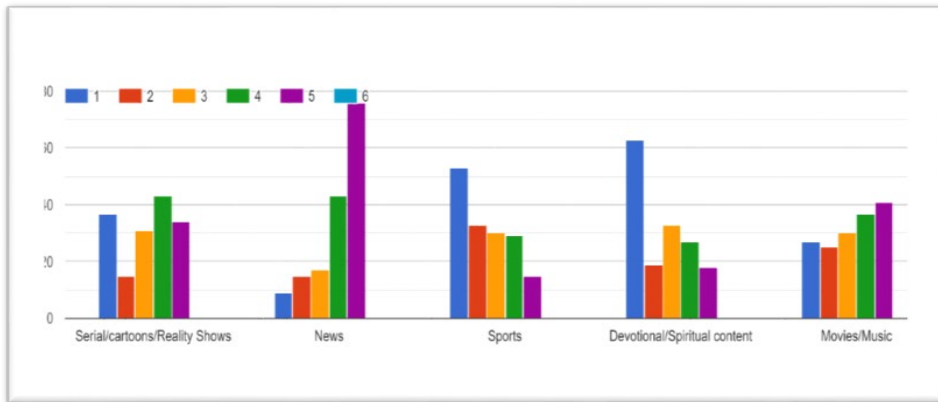*Major News Followed During the Lockdown*

Figure 6

Preferred Content at the Time of Lockdown

The above graph indicates that news was the most preferred content on TV during the lockdown and devotional/spiritual content was the least preferred. The significance of news over other content, such as serials, cartoons, reality shows, sports, music, and movies was reiterated during the pandemic as viewers wanted a minute by minute update about real-time happenings.

Figure 7

Role of News Channels in Promoting COVID-19 Appropriate Behavior
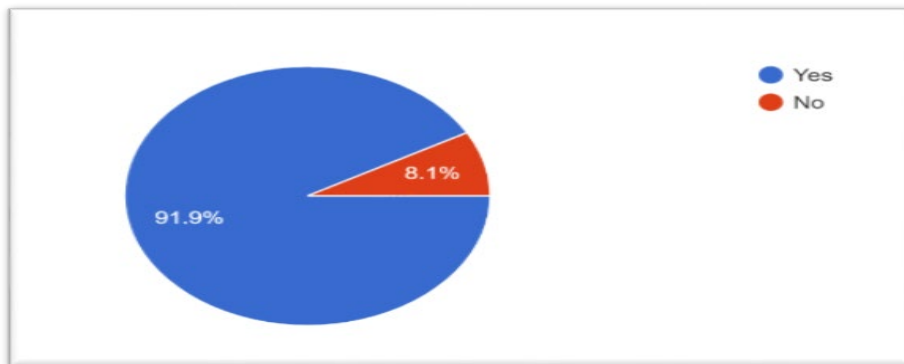
91.9% viewers responded positively to TV news coverage's call to follow safety measures, such as social distancing, sanitizing one's hands, and wearing masks. Thus, television news proved to be a powerful medium which impacted pandemic related practices and behaviors positively. The

role of TV in behavior change communication, especially during a public health crisis, is thus significant.

Figure 8

Safety Measures Highlighted on News Channels
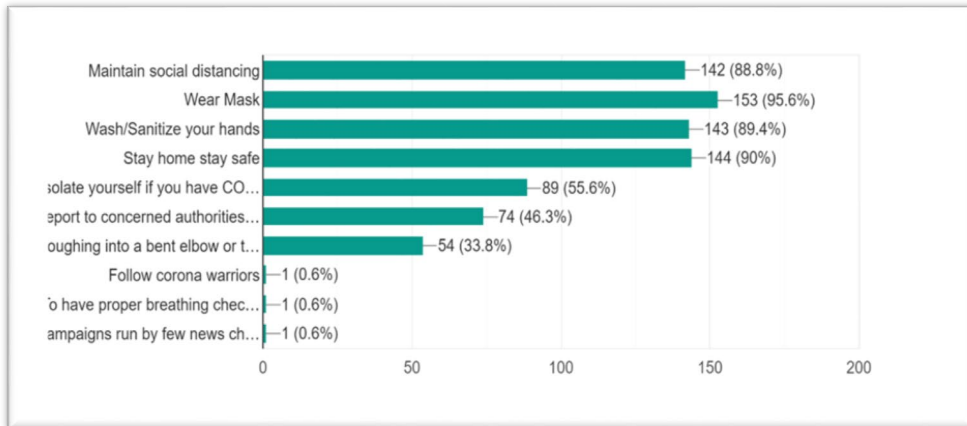
The news channels highlighted important safety measures, such as wearing of masks (95.6%), the clarion call to stay safe at home (90%), insistence on regular sanitization of hands (89.4%), and maintenance of social distancing (88.8%). Moreover, isolation in case of being affected by COVID-19 (55.6%) and reporting to concerned authorities (46.3%) were also among the other prominently highlighted safety measures during the lockdown.
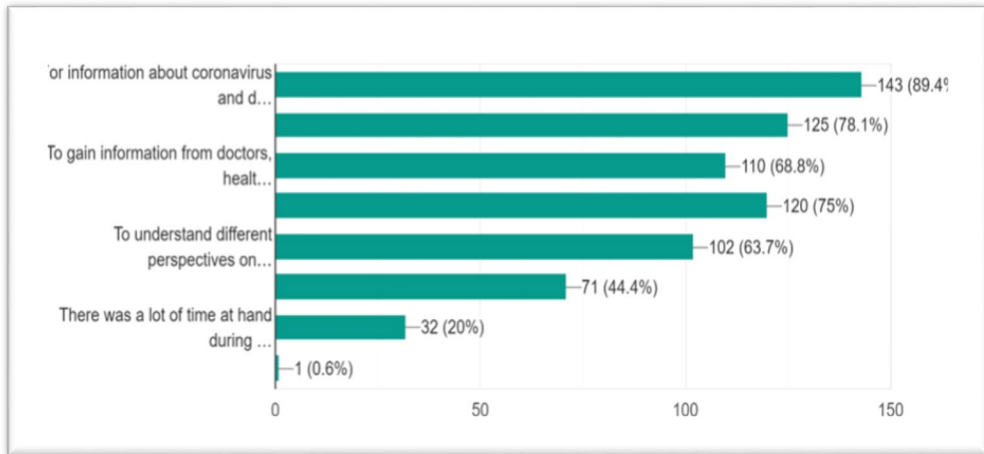
Figure 9

Preferred News Format During the Lockdown
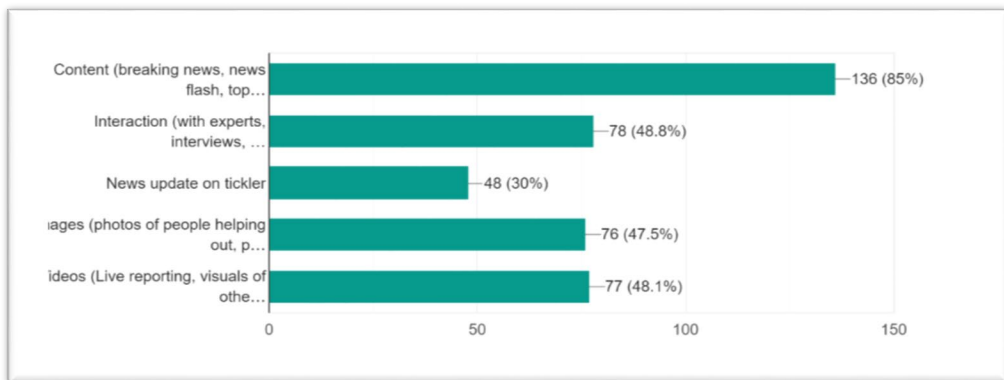
85% respondents preferred watching content (breaking news, news flash, top headlines etc.) followed by 48.8% who liked watching interaction with experts, interviews, and debates.

Figure 10

Reasons for Watching News Channels During the Lockdown

Approximately 89.4% respondents said that they watched news channels for information about coronavirus and developments around the world. This was followed by 78.1% respondents who wanted to keep themselves updated about number of active COVID-19 cases in the country. The other motivation to watch news –included staying updated about the COVID-19 situation in their surroundings (75%) and to gain information from doctors/health experts (68.8%). Approximately, 20% of respondents found television news to be a good way to spend time during the lockdown.

The average time spent by respondents watching TV news channels during the lockdown was calculated to be 1-3 hours (64.4%), whereas before the lockdown this number was 83.1% [a fall of 18.7% can be noted]. Majority of the respondents (61.9%) watched TV news from 8 pm to 11 pm. This could be attributed to the fatigue of watching repeated telecast of news during the afternoon hours (23.8%) and the scope of getting the latest news updates at night. TV9 Gujarati was the most followed news channel (71.9%), followed by Aaj Tak (62.5%). The preference accorded to watch a regional language news channel indicates the audiences' desire to stay updated with the local developments related to COVID-19.

News was ranked as the top watched content on TV by the respondents, followed by movies and music. 81.3% respondents felt that it was very important for news channels to invite medical and public health experts as part of their COVID-19 related coverage. Thus, it is imperative for TV news channels to use the medium to spread knowledge and awareness about public health. The issues related to public health should be covered more prominently, and not merely during times of health calamities and emergencies. 85% respondents preferred watching breaking news, news flash, and top headlines pertaining to COVID-19. 82.5% participants expressed a positive opinion about adequate information being provided by news channels in the context of COVID-19. Apart from news about COVID-19, 75% respondents followed political news.

Content analysis of 40 news videos of COVID-19 coverage by two major national news channels, that is, Republic TV and Aaj Tak revealed that news about the pandemic was reported in various formats. The formats used to report the news included live reportage from the ground, news briefs, and desk reports. News reportage poured in from not only the country but also from India's neighboring countries as well as important global locations so that viewers could be updated with the COVID-19 situation around the world. Use of factual information and data around COVID-19, as well as social media hashtags related to the pandemic was observed in the coverage. Coverage of COVID-19 on both news channels revolved around number of factors. For instance, Corona cases, casualties, details about assistances, and helplines from different quarters, governments, and individuals played a positive role in dealing with the pandemic. It also encouraged people to abide by COVID-19 protocols, classification of containment zones, information and updates about lockdown extensions, Corona assistance and monetary packages from government, and role of COVID-19 warriors. The primary aim of TV news coverage is to spread awareness through real-time information and make sure that citizens remain updated with ground reality of the pandemic. The news coverage also focused that people should have access to factual information and holistic perspectives around the pandemic as it was evolving each day. For the same, both news channels employed hash tags, such as #stayhomestaysafe, #don'tpanicdon'thoard, #stayhomecampaign, #besafestayindoors, #don'tviolatelockdown, #100daysof COVIDfight, #gharbaithozindaraho, and #badhegalockdownharegacorona.

Discussion

TV news remains an important source of information for viewers, especially during certain events of national and international concern, as well as during calamities and natural disasters. Participants also expressed experiencing emotions, such as anxiety (71.3%), fear (68.1%), and negativity (60.6%) due to exposure to TV news during the lockdown. This speaks volumes about the 24X7 format of news channels which tends to rely on repetition, sensationalism, and hyperbole. When not watching news about COVID-19, 80.6% respondents were glued to classic serials, such as Ramayana and Mahabharat, a telecast on Doordarshan. TV was also ranked as the most important source of information on COVID-19, whereas Radio was ranked the least important. This is an evidence of the positive and empowering role that TV can play in the development, public health, and crisis communication landscape. TV penetration in India registered a growth of 6.9% in 2020 (Saini & Farooqui, 2021).

Conclusion

The role that television plays in reaching out to the masses with crucial educational and behavioral change messages remains significant. TV news coverage in India even on crucial issues, such as a pandemic tends to tilt towards sensationalism and repetition. In such a scenario, the news discourse must engage with medical and public health experts in order to disseminate crucial information and ideas about public health issues which could be life-saving in many cases. The need for more medical journalists in the field having knowledge of both 'health' and 'news' is imperative in a country where masses still rely largely on public health systems. TV news discourse plays an enlightening and empowering role in helping Indians become more aware, sensitive and cognizant. It also proves beneficial to make people realize the importance of public health and facilitates in providing smoother access to public health facilities. The health-related challenges could be efficiently addressed for larger national interest in this way.

Limitations of the Study

- Sample size was limited to 160 respondents owing to constraints faced by the researchers in terms of access to resources for data collection since this was primarily an academic project.

- The research was carried out in a limited time span, that is, from May 2020-February 2021 owing to focus on TV news consumption and coverage during the lockdown period. The time duration was confined to meet up with deadline requirements of an academic project.
- Content from only two TV news channels, that is, from English and Hindi was analyzed. Regional language news channels were not a part of the study.
- The study was limited to the region of Gujrat (primarily two urban centers) as the researchers were residing in this area and could access respondents conveniently. Another reason was that the focus was to conduct a regional level study and elicit data that was more local in nature so that news consumption patterns of a specific region could be identified and discussed.
- Data analysis was carried out using descriptive statistics as statistical tests were not accessible and available at the researchers' disposal.

Future Research Directions

The current study was conducted on television news channels and was limited to private news channels only. The role of public broadcasters and a comparative analysis of the COVID-19 coverage by private vis-à-vis public news channels could be compared. Similar studies can be conducted in different urban and rural centers in India and other parts of the world. The studies would be helpful to gain insights about news viewing patterns during the pandemic and its different waves. A focus on regional language news channels which was not under the purview of the current study would provide useful perspectives about health news coverage in the media landscape. Future research could be carried out on the role played by other mediums, such as newspapers, public service advertisements, radio, social media, and their role during a public health crisis. Future research on the use of varying methods and analytical tools would also be helpful to explore the news media's role in crisis communication in the developmental landscape.

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