

## SELF-REFERENCING THE NEWS

### Media, Policymaking, and Public Opinion in India-Pakistan Crises

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This essay seeks to understand how the Indian media interacts with government and public opinion in framing the news. It considers factors that motivate and limit media behavior together with media impact on policymaking through coverage of India-Pakistan crises. Specifically, I primarily assess the role of English-language Indian media by reviewing coverage and drawing upon interviews with key journalists and government officials during the subcontinent's recent crises. Taken together, this analysis demonstrates the emergence of a discernible pattern of crisis behavior within the Indian media.

I address two questions, one general and one narrow. First, is the Indian media an important source of information that informs the government and society on foreign policy, especially during a crisis? Second, does the Indian media affect policymaking or decision-making during a crisis? To address the first question, I identify the problems associated with mass media and employ a diagrammatic and textual representation of its pulls and pressures. The media, news-consuming public, and policymaking community form a self-referential cycle in which each feeds and reaffirms the other's perception of reality regarding India-Pakistan crises. This cycle determines how news is framed.

To address the second question, I identify three dominant phases of Indian media-policy interaction and the flow of information. Scholarship on the role of the media highlights three modes in which this communication can take place: top-down, bottom-up, and "media-policy agency." While I find the media in India has not directly influenced policymaking in a way that impacted crisis management, it has played a role in communicating crisis narratives and amplifying the consequences of crises for democratic politics and society, all of which have indirect or second-order effects on future crisis management.

Ultimately, this study concludes that during periods of crisis the media takes its cues from the government while responding to what the news-consuming public expects to hear, see, and read. Nationalist media rhetoric fortifies clear policy

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action, and in the absence of policy certainty, the media frames information to support a course of action and government policy.

This essay proceeds in four parts. In the first section, I give a general overview of the Indian media. The second section considers the media's informational role during crises and the motivations and constraints that determine its behavior. The third section briefly reviews the literature on relationships between foreign policy, public opinion, and mass media to gauge the lens that best explains the Indian media's role in crisis situations. These are then applied to three chronological phases of government-media interaction in India since the Kargil conflict. Finally, I offer some concluding thoughts on the implications of the media's role in South Asian crises and potential for future study.

## Overview of the Indian Media Landscape

India hosts a vibrant, burgeoning, and highly competitive media.<sup>1</sup> This media is not a monolith and comprises newspapers, television, radio, and new media platforms (e.g., social media) reporting on different issues and catering to varied audiences.<sup>2</sup> South Asia also bears witness to India-Pakistan bilateral tensions characterized by low-intensity conflict and cross-border terrorism. In these interstate crisis situations, information is a valuable currency, and as the conduit between policymakers and the public, the media plays a crucial role. How information is interpreted and presented helps determine how crises are viewed, with potential to influence their trajectory. By dealing in information, the media becomes a stakeholder in crises as both a collection of unique actors and as a government tool for information dissemination. Shaping the way in which news is consumed assures that the media not only reports the news but also becomes part of it.

It is critical to first acknowledge that the Indian news media comprises a sweeping and diverse landscape. There are nearly 400 television news channels.<sup>3</sup> According to the latest figures (2013-14), of the 23 languages that newspapers across the country are registered in, there are 13,138 newspapers and periodicals in English alone.<sup>4</sup> These numbers have likely increased with the granting of more licenses in the intervening years.

On the consumption side, in 2014 there were 301,570,000 print publication readers (an annual increase of 6.5 percent), 621,118,000 television viewers (an annual increase of 3 percent), 98,967,000 Internet news site visitors (an annual increase of 1.5 percent), and 58,518,000 radio listeners (an annual increase of 1.3 percent).

1. James Painter, "Introduction," in *India's Media Boom: The Good News and the Bad*, ed. James Painter (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2013).

2. Beena Sarwar, "Media Matters," *India International Centre Quarterly* 35, no. 3/4 (2008-9): 184-93.

3. Ministry of Information Broadcasting (India), "List of Permitted Private Satellite TV Channels as on 31-05-2017," <http://mib.nic.in/sites/default/files/Master%20List%20of%20Permitted%20Private%20%20statellite%20TV%20Channels%20as%20on%2031.07.2017.pdf>.

4. "All India Number of Registered Newspapers and Periodicals by Language from 2001 to 2013-14," Open Government Data Platform India, <https://data.gov.in/catalog/number-registered-newspapers-and-periodicals-language-all-india-and-state-wise>.

The highest-grossing newspaper was a Hindi-language daily, *Dainik Jagran*, with a readership of 16,631,000. *The Times of India* was the most read English daily at 7,590,000 readers. Both newspapers' readerships increased by 1,104,000 and 336,000, respectively, from 2013 to 2014.<sup>5</sup> In January 2015, there was a 4 percent annual increase of television viewers, with the all India digital television penetration at 66 percent in reported markets.<sup>6</sup>

These numbers represent only a fraction of the Indian media. The sheer volume of news media outlets illustrates the complexities of analyzing the role and impact of the media during a crisis. Understanding such a diverse body's interaction with policymaking and public opinion, which itself defies easy definition, is similarly challenging. Nevertheless, media coverage of crises in South Asia lends itself to certain generalizations.

### Self-Referential Crisis Narratives: Motivations and Limitations

This first section seeks to address the question of what informational role the media plays between the news-consuming public and government during times of South Asian interstate crises. Information plays a central role in conflict and crisis, and in theory the media can play a valuable role as an independent source of information in adversarial or crisis situations. However, the Indian media has suffered a crisis of credibility for several years, especially relating to coverage of India-Pakistan bilateral tensions. It is often claimed that journalistic integrity and objectivity are habitually sacrificed at the altar of national security during interstate crises.<sup>7</sup> This section contends that the media contributes to a self-referential cycle that lacks the independence to offer critical viewpoints and hard investigative reporting.

This cycle stems from three factors: low adherence to certain standards, government influence and constraints, and structural incentives or changes in the media industry that drive a race to the bottom.

#### *Adherence to Standards*

The information management relationship between the news media and the government during South Asian crises dates to independence. To protect the rights of minorities, Indian and Pakistani leaders formulated a code of conduct for journalists and media houses, but few outlets have actually adhered to these lofty yet important standards.

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5. The top daily newspapers with the highest readership were all Hindi-language: *Dainik Jagran*, *Hindustan*, and *Dainik Bhaskar*. Of the English dailies, *The Times of India*, *Hindustan Times*, and *The Hindu* had the highest readership. "Indian Readership Survey 2014," Media Research Users Council, 2014, [http://www.mruc.net/sites/default/files/IRS%202014%20Topline%20Findings\\_0.pdf](http://www.mruc.net/sites/default/files/IRS%202014%20Topline%20Findings_0.pdf).

6. "TAM Annual Universe Update 2015," TAM Media Research, 2015, [http://www.tamindia.com/webview.php?web=ref\\_pdf/Overview\\_Universe\\_Update\\_2015.pdf](http://www.tamindia.com/webview.php?web=ref_pdf/Overview_Universe_Update_2015.pdf).

7. Beyond widespread anecdotal arguments by South Asia analysts, see the study of news media crisis coverage in South Asia conducted in P.R. Chari, Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, and Stephen Cohen, *Four Crises and a Peace Process* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), 186-87. The authors conclude that "the press, including the elite press, seems to gravitate to the government's position...show[ing] little if any disagreement from the line of the government of the day."

During the tenures of Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Pakistani Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan, newspapers of the time reflected and sometimes allegedly amplified bilateral political disagreements. These reports pertained to the post-Partition treatment of minorities — primarily Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims — that chose to remain behind in either India or Pakistan. To record their displeasure with these news portrayals, a telegram was sent to Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs in February 1950 that read:

...newspapers continue to indulge in fantastic statements about happenings across the border. In Pakistan, frequent references to “master plans,” which exist only in the imagination of certain newspaper editors and others in Pakistan and scurrilous writings...cannot but cause excitement in Pakistan against the minority community.<sup>8</sup>

New Delhi received an almost identical reply that matched its tone and tenor.<sup>9</sup>

The political turmoil surrounding the rights of minorities led to the signing of the Nehru-Liaquat Pact of April 1950, also known as the Delhi Pact.<sup>10</sup> It contained clauses for appropriate behavior for the media houses on both sides of the border.<sup>11</sup> A “joint press code” was then adopted in June 1950 by the All-India Newspaper Editors' Conference and the Pakistan Newspaper Editors' Conference. It called upon the media to facilitate the implementation of the Indo-Pakistani Press Agreement of 1948:

- a. By avoiding the dissemination of news calculated to undermine relations between the majority and minority communities in the two countries
- b. By refusing to give currency to mischievous opinion of individuals or organizations likely to rouse communal passions or create a sense of insecurity among the members of the minority community
- c. By rigorously excluding from the Press of each country opinion directed against the territorial sovereignty of the other or purporting to incite war
- d. By seeking through normal Press channels or Government Agencies verification of news or communal incidents before it is published
- e. By always exercising due care and caution in regard to the publication of reports of communal incidents
- f. By avoiding alarming headlines for reports of communal incidents
- g. By exercising care in the publication of pictures and cartoons likely to excite communal passions

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8. Pallavi Raghavan, “India-Pakistan’s 1950 Code on Media Portrayal of Each Other Is Relevant Even Today,” *The Wire*, January 15, 2017.

9. Raghavan, “India-Pakistan’s 1950 Code.”

10. Archana Subramanian, “Sealing the Deal,” *The Hindu*, April 8, 2016.

11. Amit Baruah, “Agreement Yes, Implementation No,” *Dawn*, March 4, 2013.

- h. By affording full facilities to Governments for correction or contradiction of published reports.<sup>12</sup>

This is an important and eminently “sensible” document in the words of Amit Baruah, resident editor at *The Hindu* and correspondent in Pakistan for several years who covered the Kargil conflict from Islamabad.<sup>13</sup> The joint press code cautions against sensationalist reporting, identifies the deliberate use of prejudiced news and opinions to provoke tensions, and advises the creation of modalities to corroborate and verify information.

This document, however, has never had salience.<sup>14</sup> During research for this essay, most journalists asked about the relevance of this document had not heard of it. As an immediate and understandable corollary, its conditions have never fully been complied with, and the media's coverage of India-Pakistan crisis situations has therefore remained complicated.

### *Government Influence and Constraints*

The Indian government has often maintained an interest in shaping — if not outright controlling — media coverage. During crises, it particularly seeks to do so in order to manage blowback on its agenda or political base. According to Shivshankar Menon, India's national security adviser from 2011-14 and foreign secretary from 2006-9 under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the Kandahar hostage crisis that followed the Indian Airlines flight 814 hijacking was probably the first and only time the government felt that public opinion was being accurately portrayed on television.<sup>15</sup> This incident allowed both the government and media to draw useful lessons. The government felt that although it had taken all necessary measures to deal with the crisis, this was not fully reflected by the media.<sup>16</sup>

For India, everything connected to relations with Pakistan is both a diplomatic and a domestic political issue. How governments address tensions with Pakistan — and the hypernationalist rhetoric that may accompany it — is a function in part of how they see that policy playing with their constituents. Dr. Sanjaya Baru, Prime Minister Singh's media advisor and chief spokesperson from May 2004 until August 2008, said that his “singular objective” as media advisor “each time there was a terror attack was to prevent communal tension” within the country.<sup>17</sup> Traditionally, during the tenures of Prime Ministers Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, the Indian National Congress' line of thinking was that good relations with Pakistan would earn it the Indian Muslim vote. With

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12. Ibid.

13. Author's interview with Amit Baruah, New Delhi, February 17, 2017.

14. Ibid.

15. Author's interview with Shivshankar Menon, New Delhi, May 30, 2017.

16. Ibid.

17. Author's interview with Sanjaya Baru, New Delhi, March 6, 2017.

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the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) winning the 2014 national elections, the game further changed because the party's electoral strategy deprioritized the Muslim vote. The state of domestic politics is, or at least has in the past been, a more vital element of crisis decision-making than media narratives. Simultaneously, the media plays a key role in framing which domestic political issues the public views as important. Managing media influence on domestic politics is thus a priority for governments during periods of crisis.

All journalists interviewed for this essay agreed that the Indian government employs varying methods to manage media during crises. According to Manoj Joshi — who covered India-Pakistan crises for publications such as *The Times of India*, *The Hindu*, and *India Today* — media coverage of national security issues is determined to a large extent by restraints imposed or allowances made by the policy elite.<sup>18</sup> In the same vein, Baru offers that “[w]e don't live in an era where governments dictate to the media. Instead, it tries to manipulate the media to message and ensure that the crisis doesn't go out of control. The media, or any other institution, can't, in the government's view, be allowed to set the agenda.”<sup>19</sup> Shekhar Gupta — founding editor of *ThePrint.in*, host of “Walk the Talk” on NDTV, and a former editor for *The Indian Express* — believes that it is legitimate for the government to seek to manipulate the news and shape crisis narratives for its interests. It is the responsibility of reporters to determine the veracity of the messaging.<sup>20</sup>

However, in the past, government management was not done by overtly pressuring the media to behave in certain ways. Using his time working with Singh as a frame of reference, Baru says, “it's not about carrots and sticks; it's about relationships.”<sup>21</sup> Successful media communications are often invisible. A lot of Baru's time went into “building relationships with journalists so that when you

18. Author's interview with Manoj Joshi, New Delhi, February 20, 2017.

19. Author's interview with Baru.

20. Author's interview with Shekhar Gupta, New Delhi, March 9, 2017.

21. Author's interview with Baru.

need them you can simply pick up the phone and say don't do this story."<sup>22</sup> He describes "one of the most valuable lessons" learned "was not telling journalists what they should do but being able to learn from them what somebody was about to do."<sup>23</sup> The relationship between the Indian government and media has thus been far more transactional and symbiotic than popularly believed: "[a]ny mature, seasoned politicians wouldn't waste time threatening editors because there are subtler, softer ways to influence the media that often involves IOUs."<sup>24</sup>

This relationship between the Indian government and media emphasizes the importance of having a media adviser with journalism experience: "[t]here is a need for a person who enjoys the confidence of the media and of the prime minister."<sup>25</sup> The best person for this job has worked as a journalist, knows how the government works, and understands the importance of spin. This is clear in the appointments of past media advisers, all except one of whom were seasoned journalists.<sup>26</sup> Maintaining these symbiotic relationships will remain key for future crisis management. Changes to the media landscape, however, require closer study and adjustments to the shifting dynamics of future crises.

### *Media Evolution in the Information Age*

Several key factors limit and motivate the evolving news media landscape globally.<sup>27</sup> Competing pressures among the media, government, and news-consuming public form a self-referential cycle to shape media narratives (*Figure 1*). To illustrate, the Indian public demands quick and resolute retaliation against cross-border perpetrators,<sup>28</sup> while the government seeks to simultaneously demonstrate to its public and its adversaries a willingness and readiness to respond.<sup>29</sup> The majority of the public expects nationalist media coverage, while the media must grapple with the sometimes-competing goals of preserving journalistic integrity and galvanizing national solidarity against perceived "enemies." The media must also balance these priorities while relying upon the government as the primary source of information during a crisis. Further challenges include the flooding of the media market both horizontally and vertically, the arrival of new media platforms, economics increasingly determining content, and the corporatization of media ownership.

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22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

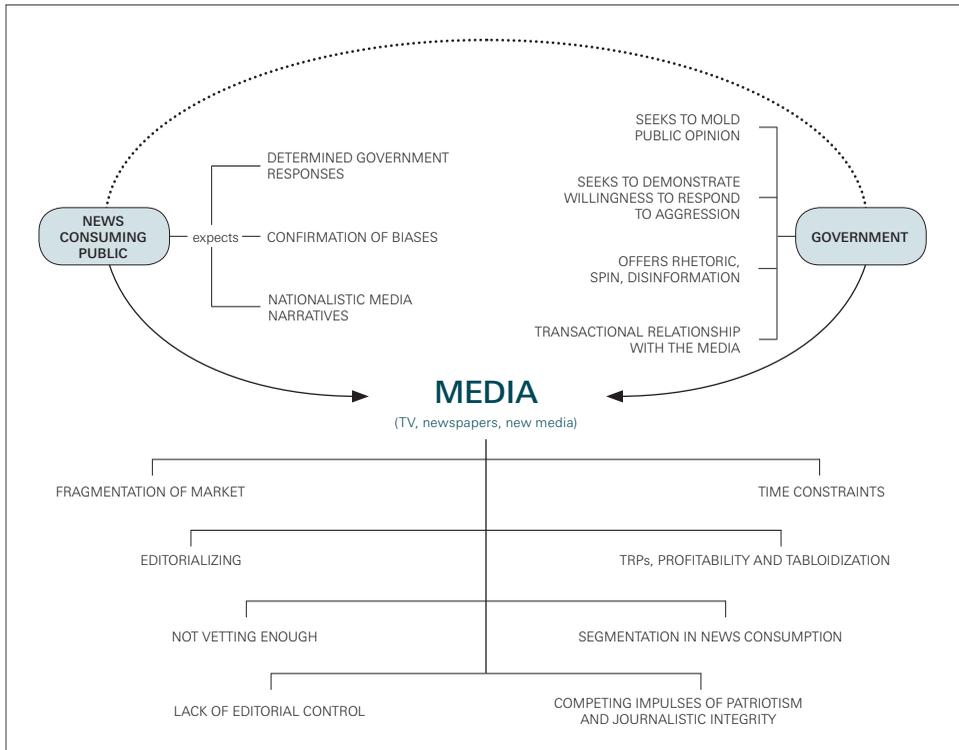
26. Former Chief Information Commissioner Deepak Sandhu followed Baru in December 2008. Both Harish Khare, who filled the position after Sandhu's departure in 2009, and Pankaj Pachauri, who was media adviser after Khare from 2012 until 2014 when the Narendra Modi government came to power, were journalists.

27. Author's interview with Baruah; Author's interview with Joshi; Author's interview with Baru; Author's interview with Gupta; Author's interview with Menon; and Author's interview with anonymous senior journalist, New Delhi, March 9, 2017.

28. For example, see Prashant Jha, "Uri Attack: Is India Getting Impatient with Delhi's Strategic Restraint?" *Hindustan Times*, September 18, 2016.

29. For example, see Mohua Chatterjee, "We Will Fight This to Finish: Amit Shah on Uri," *The Times of India*, September 25, 2016; and "Uri Terror Attack: PM Modi Likens Anger to 1965, Reposes Faith in Army," *The Times of India*, September 25, 2016.

## Self-Referencing the News



**Figure 1: Self-Referencing the News in the Information Age**

**Technology.** Technology has transformed the mechanisms for the delivery of narratives. India has a growing media and the volume of coverage itself has been augmented. Newspapers, TV networks, online news publications, and social media are all information behemoths. In previous decades, there were far fewer newspapers and TV channels, very little Internet access, and stricter editorial control.<sup>30</sup> Newspaper circulation in India is up; it is the only country in the world where print media is expanding.<sup>31</sup> India's demographics are different — with a rise in population and increasing literacy there has also been a rise in both English and vernacular newspapers, which has led to increased circulation and profits. Across these mediums, the difference in coverage is most often in degree and not in kind, allowing for a broader discussion of media as an actor.<sup>32</sup> There is now more news media coverage and many more ways for consumers to access it. Television reflects these shifts in how technology and consumption have changed the delivery of media narratives. TV debates have now relegated

30. Author's interview with Baruah; Author's interview with Joshi; Author's interview with Baru; Author's interview with Gupta; Author's interview with anonymous senior journalist; and Author's interview with Menon.

31. Prannoy Roy, "More News is Good News: Democracy and Media in India," in *India's Media Boom: The Good News and the Bad*, ed. James Painter (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2013), 1-19.

32. Author's interview with Baruah; Author's interview with Joshi; Author's interview with Baru; Author's interview with Gupta; Author's interview with Menon; and Author's interview with anonymous senior journalist.

newspapers, once “at the top of the totem pole” of information dissemination, to second place.<sup>33</sup>

**Social Media.** Just as the arrival of new technologies in the 1980s changed the ability of the media to provide real-time, uninterrupted coverage of the news, as was witnessed during Tiananmen Square and the fall of the Berlin Wall,<sup>34</sup> the more recent proliferation of new media — social media and news publications that offer real-time digitized content via the Internet — has added another layer of complexity to a media market already saturated with newspapers, satellite news, and radio channels.

Social media has one meaningful advantage. It is accessible to everyone, and one need not be a reporter or a TV anchor to publicly opine on important issues. Such open communication is undoubtedly a double-edged sword. It democratizes dialogue but can also facilitate the abusive, vituperative online behavior that is so regularly a characteristic of anti-India or anti-Pakistan sentiments.

There are also numerous pitfalls to the popularity of social media. The public increasingly relies on social media platforms to air grievances as well as supply and draw from what is sometimes fake news, which through sheer volume created by repeated circulation can manifest as facts among the populace. These “facts” are produced without checks and vetting — there is no editorial board to check or verify sources. This need also does not arise because reporting facts through social media plays a secondary role to allowing the spread of like-minded beliefs irrespective of whether they are based in reality. The anonymity of social media is misused — especially in crisis situations — which raises questions among some about whether this veil of anonymity should be pierced in extreme situations through legal measures.<sup>35</sup>

Take, for instance, Facebook, which uses algorithms to learn user consumption patterns and then curates stories that are tailor-made to individual tastes and proclivities. This fosters an echo chamber where uninformed or biased opinions are validated by the presence of similar perspectives in user newsfeeds. This mode of “news analysis” is popular for this very reason.

This example illustrates that news consumers are not seeking to have their beliefs corrected but are instead looking to have biases confirmed. Social media makes this possible.<sup>36</sup> Within the insularity of these echo chambers, perspectives on India-Pakistan crises are emotionally charged, and in trying to outdo one another in demonstrating one's nationalistic credentials, these perspectives are magnified and picked up by visual and print media by way of coverage or

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33. Author's interview with Joshi.

34. Piers Robinson, “The CNN Effect: Can the News Media Drive Foreign Policy?” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 301-9.

35. Author's interview with anonymous senior journalist.

36. W. Lance Bennett and Robert N. Entman, eds. *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), chap. 2; Author's interview with Baruah; Author's interview with Joshi; Author's interview with Baru; Author's interview with Gupta; and Author's interview with anonymous senior journalist.

commentary. During South Asian crises, social media gives an amplified voice to every hawk or retired soldier calling for military action, often intensifying anger much more than spreading calm.<sup>37</sup>

**Social Media-Savvy Leadership.** New technologies are reshaping the current landscape of news media and impacting how it interacts with governments and the public in crisis scenarios. Social media in particular has changed communication during crises. Prime Minister Narendra Modi uses these new mediums deftly, enabling virtually instant communication about potential and unfolding crises.<sup>38</sup> For the most part, his ministers have been adept at handling public messaging and acting as his spokespeople in place of a single media adviser. Many selected for Modi's Cabinet had either been in the media before or were consummate public personalities. Appointments like Nirmala Sitharaman (previously of *BBC World Service*), Prakash Javadekar (BJP spokesperson), and Piyush Goyal (BJP 2014 communications campaign lead), not to mention Modi himself — utilizing new media technologies like campaign holograms — equipped the Cabinet with skilled oratory and messaging. These are personalities made for television.<sup>39</sup>

**News Gathering.** How media runs itself is also changing. Established media houses are known to have solidified ideological orientations — centrist, right of center, left of center — that are to some degree tempered by the ruling elite.<sup>40</sup> Today, far less money is spent on newsgathering, which has created a correspondingly adverse impact on the quantity and quality of actual information, leading to more opinion than news.<sup>41</sup> The struggle to make news-gathering “sufficiently profitable” is widespread.<sup>42</sup> A journalist interviewed for this essay seconded this view, arguing that in India the fragmentation of the market has also contributed to less money being spent on newsgathering, with all TV news channels cutting costs.<sup>43</sup>

**News Cycle.** The nature of the news cycle has also changed: newspapers that once had a 24-hour period to produce print copies now have online editions that are updated in real time. Breaking news, ranging from terrorist attacks to government announcements, is also often first released on Twitter.<sup>44</sup> In the rush to break the news — with newspapers competing to remain relevant and

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37. Author's interview with Baruah; Author's interview with Joshi; Author's interview with Baru; Author's interview with Gupta; and Author's interview with anonymous senior journalist.

38. For example, see Kamna Arora, “Terror Attack on Indian Consulate in Afghanistan Foiled, Four Gunmen Killed,” *Zee News*, May 24, 2014.

39. Author's interview with anonymous senior journalist.

40. Author's interview with Baruah; and Author's interview with Joshi.

41. Author's interview with Baruah; Author's interview with Joshi; Author's interview with Baru; Author's interview with Gupta; Author's interview with Menon; and Author's interview with anonymous senior journalist.

42. Robert G. Kaiser, *The Bad News about the News* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2014).

43. Author's interview with anonymous senior journalist.

44. Raheel Khurshed, “Modi's Government Is #TransformingIndia through Twitter,” Twitter Blog, May 26, 2016, [https://blog.twitter.com/official/en\\_in/a/2016/modi-s-government-is-transformingindia-through-twitter-in.html](https://blog.twitter.com/official/en_in/a/2016/modi-s-government-is-transformingindia-through-twitter-in.html). It is also relevant to note the growing use of Twitter by Indians, who are projected to have the second largest group of users (after the United States) by 2020. See “Twitter's User Base to Grow by Double Digits This Year,” *eMarketer*, June 22, 2016.

TV networks facing off for television rating points — interpretation and packaging are prioritized over quality. This also pressures the government toward quick responses, a challenge Nik Gowing characterizes as “first, fast, flawed and frightening: the tyranny of the timeline.”<sup>45</sup> In this short timeline, no amount of vetting can validate with certainty that received information is legitimate or complete.<sup>46</sup> When an editorial desk or newsroom must make a call on whether or how to release a story, the impulse to break a new development frequently overtakes the journalistic impulse to authenticate it.

**Sources.** With shifting technologies and a faster news cycle, using unverifiable sources has become increasingly common. This is an unwelcome development because, as one senior journalist observed, the sources are often politicized.<sup>47</sup> If there is an anonymous or off-the-record tip, it should be vetted even if the information comes from the ministerial level. However, in quickly developing scenarios, journalists often overlook this step. In a developing crisis scenario, the media may seek a multiplicity of sources at a time when the government controls the narrative and can distort information. The dilemma here is whether to rely on one single source — the government — or use several unverifiable sources, especially if the information is contradictory. The lack of editorial scrutiny that ails social media also affects newspapers and television, albeit to a lesser degree.

For example, after the Uri attack, communication via the WhatsApp messaging service that claimed Indian special forces had crossed the Line of Control (LoC) and killed 20 Pakistani terrorists found its way to an online publication, *The Quint*:

Two units of the elite 2 Paras comprising 18-20 soldiers flew across the LoC in the Uri sector in military helicopters and carried out an operation that killed at least 20 suspected terrorists across three terror camps in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK).<sup>48</sup>

The Indian Army denied the claims.<sup>49</sup> While *The Quint* stands by its story, citing corroboration by the military and two other independent sources, some have concluded that this could have been the result of a disinformation campaign by the government to make itself “look good” and the lack of any Pakistani response was proof that the story was fake.<sup>50</sup> According to this conclusion, the media effectively played into the government’s hands, offering its own

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45. Nik Gowing, *Skyful of Lies' and Black Swans: The New Tyranny of Shifting Information Power in Crises*, RISJ Challenges (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2009).

46. Author’s interview with Baruah; Author’s interview with Joshi; Author’s interview with Baru; Author’s interview with Gupta; Author’s interview with Menon; and Author’s interview with anonymous senior journalist.

47. Author’s interview with anonymous senior journalist. I acknowledge the irony of quoting an anonymous respondent on the proliferation of anonymous “sources” in the media. This respondent has uniquely valuable experience.

48. Chandan Nandy, “Exclusive: Uri Avenged, Army Conducts Surgical Strikes Across LoC,” *The Quint*, September 29, 2016.

49. “Army Denies ‘Cross-border Surprise Raid,’” *The Times of India*, September 22, 2016.

50. Shivam Vij, “In War Season, Beware of Disinformation Campaigns,” *Huffington Post India*, September 22, 2016.

Clausewitz's concepts of "fog" and "friction" during war are useful for understanding media behavior during crises. The uncertainty of news as it develops and unpredictable twists in unfolding crises consistently yield the possibility of relevant facts not being fully accounted for — because of both time constraints and competition — or being completely neglected if they do not fit the media representation of a certain event.

substantiation of whys and wherefores, motivated by the need to print a story while most likely being cognizant of the lack of an authorized narrative. While this explanation may or may not hold water, it demonstrates how governments can attempt to use disinformation or carefully placed stories that do not necessarily reflect reality to serve their own agendas.

**Time.** Time is a very real constraint that leaves room for error — what Gowing calls the "tyranny of real time."<sup>51</sup> Limited real-time access to information often leads to a saturation of news coverage during crises that involves continuously repeating the same information and accounts of violence. Given the crucial role visual representation plays in shaping perception, this endless stream of violent images — played on a loop on television coverage and often with no link to the event being covered — has a negative impact on the framing of crisis narratives.

Clausewitz's concepts of "fog" and "friction" during war are useful for understanding media behavior during crises.<sup>52</sup> The uncertainty of news as it develops and unpredictable twists in unfolding crises consistently yield the possibility of relevant facts not being fully accounted for — because of both time constraints and competition — or being completely neglected if they do not fit the media representation of a certain event.<sup>53</sup> In fast-moving scenarios, news on unfolding crises may not even make it to the editorial desk before release.<sup>54</sup>

**Primetime News.** Thanks to their many roles today beyond traditional news reporting, TV news channels are more attractive for their "infotainment" value. It is this characteristic that trumps the "duller" fact-based newspaper reportage for viewers. In fact, TV channels have been held responsible for fueling public hysteria in times of crisis. A case-in-point is the 2008 Mumbai crisis, when news

51. Nik Gowing, *Real Time Television Coverage of Armed Conflicts and Diplomatic Crises: Does it Pressure or Distort Foreign Policy Decisions* (Cambridge: Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, 1994).

52. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, eds. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

53. Author's interview with Baruah; Author's interview with Joshi; Author's interview with Baru; Author's interview with Gupta; and Author's interview with anonymous senior journalist.

54. Ibid.

channels and journalists were criticized for disregarding journalistic ethics at both the scene and in the newsroom by revealing operational details<sup>55</sup> and resorting to highly invective and jingoistic name-calling. In addition, talk shows have become a platform for theatrical performances, and a significant amount of money is allegedly spent by Indian TV news channels to feature Pakistani commentators known for their anti-India rhetoric.<sup>56</sup>

For example, at an India-Pakistan conference between journalists of both countries months after the Mumbai attacks, one participant noted that about “80 percent of the prime-time coverage of the top 20 Indian news channels has been about Pakistan.”<sup>57</sup> He also noted that programs were “provocatively titled ‘Beware, Pakistan’ and ‘Improve Now, Pakistan’ and said they were often accompanied by ominous music to create ‘fear and panic’ among viewers.”<sup>58</sup> TV news coverage has evidently become high-pitched with a significant amount of editorializing. This coverage becomes even shriller during crisis situations, building on the need to visually demonstrate nationalism as well as feed into public resentment.

**Tabloidization and Profitability.** A senior journalist suggested that the degrading quality of Indian media coverage of India-Pakistan crises is ultimately financial. The more fragmented and competitive the media, the more tabloid-like it becomes. Competition leads to tabloid journalism because it attracts the highest readership/viewership. This is supported by Menon, who states, “[t]wo things have happened: one, newspapers have become businesses; *The Times of India* was the first to make this transition in the early 1990s. Two, there is a profusion of columnists and opinion, which devalues the product.”<sup>59</sup> He adds that part of the problem is the economics of not just establishing but also keeping a news channel running.<sup>60</sup>

In India, advertising agencies do not make much distinction between tabloid and serious content. How many “eyeballs” the TV network or newspaper elicits determines the advertising rate. There is thus a direct relationship between revenue, tabloidization, and fragmentation. A journalist also asserted that agencies find it difficult to justify to their clients why an advertisement should be placed on a channel that may be credible but has a lower viewership than another so-called news channel.<sup>61</sup> This provokes the prime-time news space to become what Baruah sees as “TV shows that resemble a fractious kind of high-pitched family quarrel” replacing the traditional news reporter.<sup>62</sup>

55. “Live TV Coverage Put National Security in Jeopardy, Says Bench,” *The Hindu*, August 29, 2012.

56. Author’s interview with Baruah; and Author’s interview with Gupta.

57. Rama Lakshmi, “Journalists from India and Pakistan Discuss Role in Wake of Mumbai Siege,” *The Washington Post*, April 16, 2009.

58. Ibid.

59. Author’s interview with Menon.

60. Ibid.

61. Author’s interview with anonymous senior journalist.

62. Author’s interview with Baruah.

**Language.** Language is another factor in the developing news media landscape. Despite the large number of Hindi news consumers, most advertising agencies in India give higher rates to English than Hindi channels and newspapers. This gap is even wider between English and other local languages. There is also a divergence in the kind of issues covered, with the vernacular media more focused on local developments. This means that a majority of the English print and visual news media can, even with lower television rating points, do serious journalism and still make their advertising fees. Local-language TV channels do not have this luxury, and when they cover bilateral crises, there is a high degree of accompanying sensationalism.<sup>63</sup>

**Headline Inflation or Clickbait.** News reports serve one fundamental function for a society: to reproduce facts as per available sources. Issues emerge in how headlines are constructed and the sources from which information is gleaned. Context therefore is important, and this is habitually neglected during crises. For example, a provocative headline may not bear any similarity to the actual content of a news report but could effectively create a heightened sense of alarm in the newsreader at the point of first impact.<sup>64</sup>

**Asymmetric Information.** In crisis situations, journalists are primarily reliant on government briefings for information. As the primary source of credible information, the government may attempt to use the media as a “force multiplier” by transmitting information that fits its agenda. Like the media, the Indian government is also under pressure. During a crisis, the government is faced with the competing challenges of needing to (1) publicly release enough information on a crisis as it unfolds to demonstrate a coherent management response and (2) simultaneously limit the flow of information — and specifically the involvement of foreign actors — so as to prevent unwanted escalation during a crisis.<sup>65</sup> This is where disinformation becomes an effective tool: “[t]he news is manipulated by both government and the media — media doesn’t say let’s go to war, they say let’s go to war and win it.”<sup>66</sup>

The media may participate in this campaign willingly or unknowingly depending on its relationship with the government and its own sensibilities. There is also much agency granted to the journalist, whose decision regarding the interpretation and presentation of this information becomes crucial in setting public views on a crisis. There is the added issue of cost limitations (i.e., media houses simply do not have the resources to gather information on every situation), which is where regular government briefings become relevant. The government can thus use access to incentivize crisis media narratives congruous with its own. In this

63. Author’s interview with Baruah; Author’s interview with Joshi; Author’s interview with Baru; Author’s interview with Gupta; and Author’s interview with anonymous senior journalist.

64. Author’s interview with Baruah; and Author’s interview with Gupta.

65. Austin Carson, “Facing Off and Saving Face: Covert Intervention and Escalation Management in the Korean War,” *International Organization* 70, no. 1 (2016): 103-31.

66. Author’s interview with Gupta.

sense, the media, as the intermediary between the government and public, can facilitate a government's agenda-setting process for influencing public opinion by representing threats and challenges that portray policy choices in a positive light.

**Confirmation Bias.** The public plays an equal role in making the generation and production of news a self-referential cycle. With a collective historical consciousness rooted deeply in partisan discourses, most of the Indian and Pakistani publics continue to view each other in an "us versus them" narrative. This is heightened during interstate crises. By and large, the Indian population is curious about the "other," and there is a niche audience that seeks unbiased news to develop informed opinions. However, a majority appears to seek news that will confirm prejudices. In this regard, both the media and the government are under pressure to deliver.

**Segmentation.** The way news is consumed is also segmented.<sup>67</sup> This occurs because the public does not look to a single news source as a point of reference. Instead, it seeks information from various platforms. For crisis coverage, people tend to favor TV channels and social media over newspapers.<sup>68</sup> TV requires far less effort from the news consumer, and the public looks to visual mediums for crisis coverage because they are immediate.<sup>69</sup>

**Editorial Control.** More and more media institutions lack content editors. On TV channels, anchors serve as their own editors and have no one to legitimately edit their work. Primetime TV is now mostly debates and there is no real news reporting between 7 p.m. and 11 p.m. In effect, newspapers break the news and TV channels debate it.

**Journalistic Ethics.** In covering India-Pakistan crises, journalistic impulses also become moot. A journalist's job is to report with integrity and without biases, and as the primary purveyor of information in a quickly developing landscape, he or she is accountable to a country's public. Their duty should be serving public interest. Here, several complications arise.

What defines public interest? The mood during crisis situations suggests that a majority of the public is interested in having their prejudices reinforced and substantiated through the news. This in turn leads to a veritable railroading of what constitutes the news and how it should be presented. The government and the media have the same audience, and the public exerts pressure on both: on government to react stridently to cross-border transgressions and on media to endorse and corroborate policy action. Thus, while the government and the media may have their own set of motivations for the kind of behavior they display, public expectations play a considerable role in informing those motivations.

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67. Author's interview with Joshi.

68. Daya Kishan Thussu, "Managing the Media in an Era of Round-the-Clock-News: Notes from India's First Tele-war," *Journalism Studies* 3, no. 2 (2002): 203-12.

69. Author's interview with Gupta.

In addition to these extenuating circumstances, a journalist could also face obstacles by reporting the news without prejudice. During crises, these obstacles can prove to be nearly insurmountable. In a state that draws its legitimacy from the political and cultural roots of its founding and to which territoriality is a deeply sensitive issue, impartial journalism and patriotism do not always go hand in hand.<sup>70</sup> Journalists are also likely to feel the moral burden of building solidarity across the country and not merely sitting on the sidelines as observers. India and Pakistan have great historical baggage, and under most circumstances, those covering the news appreciate what this obligation entails. Crisis situations reveal the extent to which the notions of patriotism and journalistic objectivity come into conflict as competing impulses.<sup>71</sup> This is an unenviable position.

Menon believes that in India, “media output is determined by factors apart from its desire to influence and/or shape policy.”<sup>72</sup> The information communicated between the Indian government and public during crises is shaped by issues such as profitability and competition, new technology, leadership with social media savvy, marketing pressures, a substantially faster news cycle, diversified information sources, and the rise of TV talk shows. These elements come together to determine how and why the media chooses, with the limited agency available to it, to cover interstate bilateral crises between India and Pakistan. These elements have together shaped crisis narratives in the media throughout recent South Asian history.

## Models of Media and Policymaking

The second portion of this essay seeks to understand different models of media-policy relations and how they might explain policy and crisis decision-making. In this section, I draw on the literature to identify three basic models of media-policy relations. I subsequently evaluate which of these models best accounts for different phases from 1999-2017.

The relationship between public opinion and policymaking is easier to acknowledge and substantiate than the link between public opinion and foreign policy as a subset of public policy. Public opinion, too, defies easy definition. Menon believes that “what is portrayed in the media as suggestive of public opinion is often really a representation of narrower interests.”<sup>73</sup>

A recently conducted survey, the “largest ever random, nationally representative survey of foreign policy attitudes of Indians in 2005-6 covering more than

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70. Author's interview with Gupta.

71. Author's interview with Baruah; Author's interview with Joshi; Author's interview with Baru; Author's interview with Gupta; and Author's interview with anonymous senior journalist.

72. Author's interview with Menon.

73. Ibid.

200,000 households...of nine specific socio-economic (SEC) groups,<sup>74</sup> was conducted across urban and rural India. Some of its key findings include:

- Urban elite are the most consequential in shaping foreign policy
- In a ranking of positive domestic public attitudes toward foreign countries, Pakistan fares the worst
- Broad public opinion on foreign policy suggests pragmatism and a lack of naiveté.<sup>75</sup>

These attitudes are, no doubt, drawn in part from Indian media coverage of foreign policy issues. With the transformation of the media landscape, the media has gone from a “passive transmission mechanism”<sup>76</sup> to taking on a more “activist role,”<sup>77</sup> priming public opinion through filtered messaging and thereby also “informing, shaping, or skewing the foreign policy debate.”<sup>78</sup> This independence may help shape public opinion and influence foreign policy insofar as it can hasten the decision-making process — especially through negative coverage — but it does not substantively determine policy.<sup>79</sup> In general, the public approves government foreign policy decisions as long as they are within a range of acceptable options.<sup>80</sup> The bottom line is that while the media’s role in policymaking has diminished, it still matters. Eventually, however, “its influence is not going to affect policy change.”<sup>81</sup>

Information consumption and knowledge of politics, policy, and relations between states, individuals, and societies are not an objective experience of reality. Through symbols, words, images, and opinions that have “social, political or personal ramifications,”<sup>82</sup> mass media provides a subjective version of reality to base political judgement. Commercialization and the commodification of news increasingly impact media behavior as well.<sup>83</sup> In effect, the “media could determine what the public takes to be important,” shaping public agendas.<sup>84</sup>

In answering the five foundational “Ws” of reporting — who, what, when, where, and why — journalists and editors are confronted daily with choices, such as assessing received information and determining how much

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74. Devesh Kapur, “Public Opinion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy*, ed. David M. Malone, C. Raja Mohan, and Srinath Raghavan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 302.

75. *Ibid.*, 302-3.

76. *Ibid.*, 304.

77. *Ibid.*

78. Manoj Joshi, “The Media in the Making of Indian Foreign Policy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy*, 265.

79. For further discussion, see Joshi, “The Media in the Making of Indian Foreign Policy”; Kapur, “Public Opinion”; and Shruti Pandalai, *Who Sets the Agenda? Does “Prime Time Really Pace Policy?” The Indian Experience* (New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2013).

80. Kapur, “Public Opinion.”

81. Author’s interview with Menon.

82. Karen S. Johnson-Cartee, *News Narratives and News Framing: Constructing Political Reality* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 16.

83. See Bennett and Entman, *Mediated Politics*, xxiv.

84. Shanto Iyengar, Mark D. Peters, and Donald R. Kinder, “Experimental Demonstrations of the Not-So-Minimal Consequences of Television News Programs,” *American Political Science Review* 76, no. 4 (1982): 848.

importance to accord it in programming and news coverage. This process helps shape public opinion and influence policymaking through three tools at the media's disposal:

- Agenda-setting. "Readers learn...how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position."<sup>85</sup>
- Priming. "Changes in the standards that people use to make political evaluations."<sup>86</sup>
- Framing. Describing and contextualizing an issue "in one way rather than in a logically equivalent alternative way" that "can radically alter which options are chosen and which foregone."<sup>87</sup>

These choices can lead to different versions of the same story, or differentiated news "products" put out by newspapers and television channels.<sup>88</sup> Reality is thus a highly subjective experience, filtered through communication with mass media rather than a direct interaction with it.<sup>89</sup> As Walter Lippmann, one of the most influential journalists of the 20th century, once noted,

The subtlest and most pervasive of all influences are those which create and maintain the repertory of stereotypes. We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And those preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception.<sup>90</sup>

This results in a reality mediated by the media, which is then filtered based on consumer perceptions and discussion with peers.<sup>91</sup>

Three explanations dominate studies of the relationship between the news media and policymaking: (1) pre-cable era "manufacturing consent" that theorizes news only reflects official government lines,<sup>92</sup> (2) the "CNN effect" that posits ways in which the media triggers foreign policy decision-making through its coverage, and (3) the more recent "Al-Jazeera effect" that indicates a symbiotic relationship between social media and the news media, with its specific roots in the "Arab Spring" of 2011 when *Al-Jazeera* amplified emerging stories told by the public on social media.<sup>93</sup>

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85. Maxwell E. Coombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda Setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972): 176-87.

86. Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

87. Ibid.

88. James T Hamilton, *All the News That's Fit to Sell: How the Market Transforms Information into News* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), chap. 1.

89. Johnson-Cartee, *News Narratives and News Framing*, 4.

90. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004), 49.

91. Johnson-Cartee, *News Narratives and News Framing*, 16.

92. See Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002).

93. Pandalai, *Who Sets the Agenda?*

There are two implicit means of manufacturing consent: the executive and elite versions. The executive version argues that state leadership and media owned by major corporations collude to create an agenda-driven environment that induces favorable public policy opinions in the interest of the state elite. The elite version argues that news conforms to the official line without any pressure necessarily being exercised on it, and any journalistic criticism of policy is a result of the professional inclination to question and critique.<sup>94</sup>

From this literature, we can derive three general models for how the Indian media interfaces with the government and the public in times of crisis. The first model is essentially a “top-down” model in which the government colludes with or captures the media to influence public opinion.

The second model — the “media-agency” model — derives from literature on the *CNN* effect. This literature was developed around post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy and posits that saturated coverage and 24-hour news cycles can force certain issues on to government agendas (even if they are suboptimal for government interests) and potentially accelerate decision-making. This model accords more autonomy and capacity to the media to influence government decision-making through the selection of news coverage as well as the tenor, tone, and intensity of coverage. Adapted to the case of India, the model suggests the media can drive issues and decision-making rather than determining them.

Another variant of this media-agency model is what Piers Robinson describes as a “media-policy interaction” model by taking note of the circumstances in which both the *CNN* effect and “manufacturing consent” occur in motivating decisions to intervene.<sup>95</sup> In this model, the media influences policy when there is government uncertainty by framing narratives that “advocate a particular course of action.”<sup>96</sup> Thus, the media critiques policy when there is conflict within the establishment regarding policy options. In the same scenario, if the government has a clear, unified, or strong position, it will set the agenda for the media. Government action (or inaction) is the independent variable that determines the course of media behavior. The media amplifies clear policy regarding bilateral crisis situations; in moments of policy uncertainty, the media can use the space created by government uncertainty to question executive decision-making or lack thereof.

A third “bottom-up” model might expect that with the increasing democratization and horizontal networks of information, through mediums like social media, agendas in the future could be introduced by the public through the media and then on to the government. Both the media-agency model and the bottom-up model expect that the media can influence government decision-making

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94. Robinson, “The CNN Effect.”

95. *Ibid.*

96. *Ibid.*

insofar as setting an agenda, accelerating a policy choice, and tilting a position. After the Uri attack in September 2016 some analysts speculated that pressure from domestic constituencies manifested through social media may have factored into the Indian government's choice of more publicized and aggressive "surgical strikes."<sup>97</sup>

Delving into the specific subset of foreign policy, what impact does the mass media have on Indian decision-making and public opinion regarding India-Pakistan crises? Government decision-making can be reflective of public opinion and media to the extent there is an overlapping interest between all three.<sup>98</sup> While media coverage can "highlight problems and help to put them on the policy agenda,"<sup>99</sup> it rarely, if at all, plays a decisive role in policymaking.<sup>100</sup> Media attention highlighting issues can encourage policy action as "a catalyst for humanitarian help and financial aid," for example, but so far "has not forced crisis prevention beyond carefully defined diplomatic limits."<sup>101</sup>

Public opinion as interpreted and portrayed in the media also does not lend itself to policy formulation. The public is not thought to have a deep understanding of crisis decision-making, especially in relation to military measures. For example, consider the 2016 Indian "surgical strikes" on "terror launch pads" along the LoC in Pakistan in response to the Uri attack on an Indian army brigade headquarters in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K).<sup>102</sup> Many speculated that Prime Minister Modi's decision to authorize the strikes was "likely influenced" by public pressure for serious punitive action.<sup>103</sup> As experienced analysts and the Indian National Congress party were quick to point out, similar military actions were also taken under Prime Minister Singh's government, which were not made public at the time.<sup>104</sup> Therefore, the strategy of "surgical strikes" incorporated in the recently released Indian military doctrine is not a new decision that the Modi government was induced to take under public pressure.<sup>105</sup> Rather, media coverage replicated the media-policy interaction model of reflecting policy decision-making. However, both public opinion and the media likely influenced the nature of communication about the strikes.

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97. C. Uday Bhaskar, "Uri Attack: Pressure on Modi Govt to Act Decisively 'Now' Is Visible, but Must Be Well Thought Through," *The Indian Express*, September 19, 2016; Harish C. Menon, "Wounded by Pakistan, Indians Are Preparing for Battle — on WhatsApp and Facebook," *Quartz*, September 23, 2016; and Samanth Subramanian, "What Actually Happened in Kashmir?" *The Atlantic*, October 6, 2016.

98. Author's interview with Menon.

99. Nik Gowling, "Inside Story: Instant Pictures, Instant Policy: Is Television Driving Foreign Policy?" *The Independent*, July 2, 1994.

100. Author's interview with Baruah; Author's interview with Joshi; Author's interview with Baru; Author's interview with Gupta; Author's interview with Menon; and Author's interview with anonymous senior journalist.

101. Gowling, "Inside Story."

102. "Surgical Strikes: Full Text of Indian Army DGMO Lt Gen Ranbir Singh's Press Conference," *The Indian Express*, September 29, 2016.

103. See for example, Shashank Joshi, "Kashmir: Why Is India's Modi Going on the Offensive?" *CNN*, September 30, 2016.

104. Joshi, "Kashmir"; and Indo-Asian News Service, "Surgical Strikes Were Conducted Thrice During UPA Rule: Congress," *NDTV*, October 5, 2016.

105. Ministry of Defence (India), *Joint Doctrine Indian Armed Forces*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff, 2017).

The broader news media, receiving its cues from the government in crisis scenarios like Uri, amplifies clear and decisive policy. Social media, like other news mediums, impacts the national conversation around issues such as crisis scenarios but does not influence policy decisions. The *Al-Jazeera* effect, therefore, bears weight in an Indian context only insofar as social media helps color how a crisis is understood and experienced by the public. In periods when the government lacks a clear policy, however, such as after the beheading of an Indian soldier in December 2012, the Indian media sometimes shapes the debate around policy action and pushes for aggressive government action.<sup>106</sup> In 2013, India saw the first uptick in annual violence in J&K since the 2001-2 crisis.<sup>107</sup>

In India, if there are instances of discernible public pressure and calls for action against Pakistan, the government is on most occasions able to respond through equally nationalist official speeches irrespective of whether this is mirrored in actual government policy. Eventually, the government will undertake a set of actions it considers in its and India's best interests, regardless of public sentiment. The choices available to the government become limited once a foreign policy stance is made public, after which the series of events become predictable. Decisions that narrow government options are taken long before the media or the public get wind of them, indicating their lack of agency in shaping policy. These decisions are based primarily on what the government determines as the will of its support base.<sup>108</sup>

External powers like the United States believe that they have more influence on Indian decision-making than is the case but are also ultimately cognizant that their role in India's strategic calculations is secondary or perhaps even tertiary. The primary consideration is the government's own survival and how well it does domestically.<sup>109</sup> The process of media and policymakers interacting, together with the public, forms a cycle that shapes how crises are understood.

### Three Phases of Crisis Media Narratives: 1999-2017

In this section, I assess whether these three types of media-policy models (top-down, media-agency, and bottom-up) can be used to explain Indian state behavior and policymaking during a two-decade period punctuated by numerous India-Pakistan interstate crises.

In the roughly 19-year period since the 1999 Kargil conflict, crisis media narratives in India have not undergone dramatic change.<sup>110</sup> However, there have been several different phases of crisis narratives, all of which were shaped by

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106. "Defence Ministry Formally Confirms Beheading of Soldier," *The Hindu*, January 12, 2013.

107. Praveen Swami, "Exclusive: Dirty War on LoC Preceded Deadly Poonch Ambush," *Firstpost*, August 6, 2013.

108. Author's interview with Menon.

109. *Ibid.*

110. Author's interview with Baruah; Author's interview with Joshi; Author's interview with Baru; Author's interview with Gupta; Author's interview with Menon; and Author's interview with anonymous senior journalist.

cues taken by the media from the government of the day.<sup>111</sup> These phases roughly break down as (1) 1999-2008, (2) 2009-13, and (3) 2014-17.

The top-down model of media-policy relations via government-shaped narratives seems to explain the first phase. In the second phase, from the 2008 Mumbai crisis up through 2013, the media-agency model appears to have greater traction. While it did not have a direct effect on policy, government weakness, uncertainty, and inconsistency created openings that allowed the media to inject its own narrative. This media agency unleashed potential second-order effects on domestic politics, paving the way for a change in government and public attitudes, which would eventually — though indirectly — shape future crisis policy and decision-making. The third period is once again best characterized by the top-down model but bears some traces of a bottom-up model due to the increasing importance of social media.

### *Period 1 (1999-2008)*

Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's careful rhetoric and mature signaling during the 1999 Kargil conflict, which had a parallel impact upon media coverage, characterized the first phase. As the top-down model would expect, whether he was upping the pressure on Pakistan to act or toning it down to ensure successful coercive diplomacy, media coverage generally mirrored the government's tone.<sup>112</sup>

Baru characterized government interactions with the media during Kargil as a successful example of a "planned media intervention."<sup>113</sup> Specifically, he referenced the subgroup set up within the National Security Advisory Board, which brought together a set of civilian experts to advise the government on media management. Kargil marked the beginning of daily media briefings, which were undertaken by Indian Ministry of External Affairs Spokesperson Raminder Jassal. Media analysis of Kargil was a diplomatic victory for India, "because of how media coverage was shaped and public opinion was molded."<sup>114</sup>

Prime Minister Singh, who came to power in 2004, initially carried on Vajpayee's policy of composed, measured messaging. Gupta observes that the evidence of Singh's strategy working well was the media amplifying the government's clear policy and messaging on Pakistan.<sup>115</sup> This pattern of successful government management of crisis narratives continued until the next major India-Pakistan crisis: the 2008 Mumbai crisis.

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111. Author's interview with Baru; and Author's interview with Gupta.

112. Author's interview with Gupta.

113. Author's interview with Baru.

114. Ibid.

115. Author's interview with Gupta.

### *Period 2 (2009-13)*

The media-agency model becomes increasingly useful in explaining the second period. Phase two of India's crisis narratives took shape under a weakened Prime Minister Singh and government led by the Indian National Congress party, the chaos of the 2008 Mumbai crisis, and the 2009 general election. In July 2008, Singh faced a vote of confidence over the U.S.-India Civilian Nuclear Cooperation Agreement.<sup>116</sup> Although he survived the vote and the deal went on to become a cornerstone of his legacy, the victory was hard-fought against a harsh domestic political backdrop characterized by members of Parliament calling for his resignation.<sup>117</sup>

In November 2008, the Indian government was caught completely off-guard by the Mumbai attacks and had “zero planning” for a media response to the incident. As a result, the chiefs of the Central Reserve Police Force, National Security Guard, and the Mumbai Police were all simultaneously speaking on behalf of the government as the crisis was unfolding. Marine commandos even held a briefing wearing masks; everybody wanted a piece of the action. There was no central, organized government management strategy for handling the crisis or the media. In addition to its own intrinsic reporting foibles and while it operated in a fog of information, the media picked up on the absence of a clear, coherent government response to the Mumbai attacks. In the absence of policy certainty, it rushed in to compel a befitting response to Pakistan, with the potential to produce a *CNN* effect during a policy vacuum.<sup>118</sup> Despite much saber rattling on Indian television, government policy did not end up reflecting the media's calls for military action.<sup>119</sup> Menon, India's foreign secretary at the time, also asserts that although media coverage of the attacks did very little to affect policy change, the government realized rather belatedly that they needed to control the situation and the narrative.<sup>120</sup> Subsequently, during the 2010 German bakery bombing in Pune, journalists were not allowed access to the scene.<sup>121</sup>

The 2009 Indian general election resulted in the Indian National Congress-led United Progressive Alliance being elected for a second term. However, internal political tumult within the alliance further weakened the ability of the Indian government to portray a unified policy message.<sup>122</sup> Moreover, the run-up to the election ensured a fraught domestic political climate. These conditions created space for the Indian media to be more critical of Indian policy and advocate taking a harder line with Pakistan.

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116. In a bicameral parliamentary system of government, a vote of confidence is a way of challenging a sitting government — the prime minister and his or her Cabinet. If the vote results in a no confidence motion, the government must resign.

117. Rama Lakshmi and Emily Wax, “India's Government Wins Parliament Confidence Vote,” *The Washington Post*, July 23, 2008.

118. Author's interview with Baruah; Author's interview with Joshi; Author's interview with Baru; Author's interview with Gupta; and Author's interview with anonymous senior journalist.

119. Samarth Pathak, “Indian TV News Channels Draw Flak for ‘Irresponsible’ Reporting of Mumbai Attack,” *Hard News*, December 6, 2008.

120. Author's interview with Menon.

121. *Ibid.*

122. Author's interview with Baru; and Author's interview with Gupta.

Bilateral tension followed both the 2008 Mumbai crisis and the 2009 general election. Violence on the LoC, the process of attempting to bring all the Mumbai attack suspects to India for trial, investigations into the failures to prevent the attack,<sup>123</sup> and Singh's continuing belief in dialogue with Pakistan against all odds cost him considerable domestic political capital.

The second phase lends support to Robinson's hypothesis of policy uncertainty and inconsistent messaging in his media-interaction model facilitating greater autonomy in media coverage. For example, Indian media sources were critical of perceived weakness in the Singh government after it accepted a clause in a 2009 joint statement with Pakistan that referenced claims of India fueling militancy in Baluchistan.<sup>124</sup> Generals on television also voiced complaints about India conceding too much ground.<sup>125</sup>

The headline-dominating beheading of an Indian soldier, Hemraj, on the LoC in January 2013 is another instance of a weak government creating a vacuum for the media to fill.<sup>126</sup> 2012 was the least deadly year on the LoC since the 1980s.<sup>127</sup> At that point in the year in all of J&K, India had lost only 14 uniformed men, of whom 7 were J&K police and 5 from the Central Reserve Police Force. The ceasefire had in fact held very well.<sup>128</sup> Following the beheading, BJP leader Sushma Swaraj, then leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha, said that if Pakistan did not return Hemraj's head, India should get at least 10 heads from Pakistan in return.<sup>129</sup> The government, under Singh, lost control of the debate on this issue.<sup>130</sup>

Even though the post-Mumbai period was not very lively on the LoC, every small incident was reported with much fanfare. It was in this period, coinciding with the beginning of the third phase and the weakening of Singh's leadership, that the BJP- Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh alliance began building the anti-corruption, hypernationalistic narrative that it would eventually ride to power in the next general election in 2014.

### *Period 3 (2014-17)*

Prime Minister Modi's meteoric rise and the BJP-led government brought about the third and current phase where the top-down model once again explains much of the media-government relations in crisis. At the same time, the bottom-up model appears to have some traction in this third period given pressures

123. See for example, Shishir Gupta, "What Went Wrong: The Inside Story," *The Indian Express*, December 26, 2008.

124. Joshi, *The Oxford Handbook on Indian Foreign Policy*; and "TEXT — India, Pakistan Prime Minister's Joint Statement," *Reuters India*, July 16, 2009.

125. Author's interview with Gupta.

126. "Defence Ministry Formally Confirms Beheading of Soldier," *The Hindu*, January 12, 2013.

127. "Fatalities in Terrorist Violence in Jammu and Kashmir 1988-2017," South Asia Terrorism Portal, [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/jandk/data\\_sheets/annual\\_casualties.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/jandk/data_sheets/annual_casualties.htm).

128. Author's Interview with Gupta.

129. "If We Don't Get Hemraj's Head, Let's Get 10 of Theirs, Says Sushma Swaraj," *NDTV*, January 14, 2013.

130. Author's interview with Gupta.

exerted by social media in setting the conversation. Bottom-up pressures, however, have yet to have any real policy impact.

This phase is characterized by three developments: the rise of a hypernationalist narrative that both media and government mutually reinforce, very selective and controlled messaging about crisis decisions resulting in limited information available to the media, and an increasingly “tenuous relationship between what the government does and what the media says.”<sup>131</sup>

“Superannuated generals and sundry hawks” shaking their fists at Pakistan began appearing on primetime news roughly around the beginning of this phase, and on that, Gupta believes “sanity has not been restored since.”<sup>132</sup> It is difficult to genuinely debate national security issues on television; the hawkish, aggressive, and militaristic discourse precludes intellectual discussion. Nothing in the Indian discourse, which is tactical and jingoistic, reflects critically on the utility of force, and the media portrays every military development as advancement.<sup>133</sup>

On the institutionalization of official communications to enable feedback on government policy, Menon argues that while Modi has demonstrated his capability to establish a link with the public, he has been less successful in explaining government policy or broader foreign policy frameworks to the same audience. Without a cohesive body making foreign policy and better communications procedures to explain why the government chooses certain decisions, the media is left to interpret what it can glean from official press briefings.<sup>134</sup> This indicates a strong top-down model at some divergence with phase one, which, though also top-down, was defined primarily by Vajpayee's measured overtures to the media, later carried on by Singh. In this phase, Modi speaks directly to the people, often bypassing the need for the media as an amplifier. Tellingly, Modi does not favor travelling with a team of journalists from different media houses on his foreign trips, as has been the tradition, and prefers scripted speeches in a controlled environment to press conferences.<sup>135</sup> The two-way interaction between the media and government has become “less and less,”<sup>136</sup> and with such little back-and-forth between the media and government, the former's policy influence has dwindled.<sup>137</sup>

According to Menon, media coverage of the post-Pathankot and Uri landscape is a good way to look at how the Modi government effectively regulated media narratives by releasing controlled doses of information.<sup>138</sup> Both the Pathankot

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131. Author's interview with Menon.

132. Author's interview with Gupta.

133. *Ibid.*

134. Author's interview with Menon.

135. Ashok K. Singh, “Indian Media Needs Modi. Modi Doesn't Need Indian Media,” *DailyO*, June 12, 2017; and “Criticise Trump, but at Least He's Holding Press Conferences. Modi Isn't,” *DailyO*, February 17, 2017.

136. Author's interview with Menon.

137. *Ibid.*

138. *Ibid.*

Good journalism is balanced; it reports facts and attempts to reflect reality — but it does not operate in isolation. Coverage is also inevitably rooted in historical, cultural, and political contexts. There are many stakeholders in a crisis — the government, the media, and the public being some of the principal characters — all of whom work under push and pull circumstances.

and Uri attacks occurred within a few months of each other, one roughly at the beginning of 2016 and the other toward its end. Massive calls for action on social media — also showcased on news channels as the dominant public sentiment — defined the year, especially post-Uri. The government’s highly publicized “surgical strikes response” displayed the increasing currency of the bottom-up model in this phase.

These three phases illustrate how the Indian media has interacted with and responded to leadership in New Delhi during bilateral crises. They also highlight how shifts in Indian domestic politics impact media narratives and determine the role of media during crises.

## Conclusion

Good journalism is balanced; it reports facts and attempts to reflect reality — but it does not operate in isolation. Coverage is also inevitably rooted in historical, cultural, and political contexts. There are many stakeholders in a crisis — the government, the media, and the public being some of the principal characters — all of whom work under push and pull circumstances. In South Asia, governments, media, and the public have much to contend with, and foremost among these pressures is the India-Pakistan relationship and its fraught history.

The news media can help governments identify and prioritize problems during a conflict if the coverage is effective. Regrettably, patchy, selective, and biased news — especially on television — ensures that it is unable to play a constructive role in policymaking.<sup>139</sup> During crises, the Indian media at best shapes the environment in which policy calculations are made and become publicly acceptable but does not contribute to policymaking directly. Government action or inaction is the cornerstone by which media cues are drawn, mirroring decisive leadership and policy action or amplifying elite conflict over policy when the leadership appears lacking.

139. Author’s interview with Gupta.

This essay approached media-policy interactions in India through two central questions: what role does the media play in informing the government and public opinion on foreign policy during crises, and does the media influence, or shape, crisis decision-making? I found that government, media, and public opinion in the information age form a self-referential cycle in framing the news — especially during crises. Each of the three stakeholders responds to various motivations and constraints while also imposing limitations on the other two. While these problems are not inherent to the Indian mass media only, they become important in understanding the factors that shape crisis media narratives. These range from competition and profitability — acknowledged by several interviewees as one of the key limitations on good journalism — to a lack of sufficient vetting of information and editorial control. Eventually, the temperature of media coverage of national security issues is largely determined by restraints imposed or allowances made by the policy elite, and as a result, the media does not appear to be the most dependable arbiter of information in a crisis.

To address the second question, I identified three phases of government-media interaction post-Kargil — 1999-2008, 2009-13, 2014-17 — coinciding with the Vajpayee, Singh, and Modi governments. An analysis of the literature revealed three primary modes of communication between the media and policymakers: top-down, media-policy agency, and bottom-up. Contextualizing these modes in the three phases identified above, I found that both the Vajpayee and Modi periods are best explained by the top-down model, where the media takes its cue from a decisive government, with some degree of difference in how both Vajpayee and Modi have engaged with the media in their personal capacities. In the Modi phase, the pressures of social media — the bottom-up model — also become increasingly relevant. While Singh continued the top-down approach in his first term, his second term is characterized by the media-policy agency model, in which a weak government creates a vacuum for the media to steer the conversation. Thus, the independent variable determining media behavior is consistently the state of the political leadership.

Ultimately, different models of media-policy interaction notwithstanding, the media in India does not shape crisis policymaking. It can, however, play an important role in amplifying and communicating narratives, hastening the decision-making process, and framing public conversation around crises. It is through this framing role that the media could potentially have an indirect influence on future crisis management.

This study has offered some initial analysis of the shifting role of news media in subcontinental crisis management. The media will continue to play a key role in any future crises in South Asia. There is therefore a need for additional studies on the role of both the Indian and Pakistani media in how crises develop and play out.

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