

The Media and Public Opinion During Covid-19 in India

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Abstract

The advent of the COVID-19 disease has left the world economy in shambles with losses of human lives in its wake. Although most of the countries are now experiencing a steady decline in new cases, India has a different story to tell. With an average of 65,000 new cases daily, it is extremely important that dissemination of information regarding the virus is effectively communicated through media channels. The severity of the pandemic in India is the root cause of the panic and chaos that the country is currently ailing through. However, much of the crisis that has been created is due to compromised truth and often disempowering communication. Indian journalists have been forced to toe the government line on the pandemic as the Supreme Court of India, earlier in April of 2020, passed an order which directed the media to publish the “official” government versions with regards to the development of COVID-19 in the country. This order was delivered by the Apex court of the country to prevent the spread of fake news amongst the general public at large. The question then arose; was the government providing sufficient information to the people or media as a matter of fact? Are all the facts, down to the statistics in the smallest of the districts, being provided to the citizens? Many of the media companies of India are owned by the private sector and are complicit with the order that has been passed. While there is still a small section of journalists who are driven by their ethics to find truth and accuracy in what they report, social media has also played a key role in providing a platform to the public to express their opinion upfront. However, it has also become a source of bogus news, rumours and misinformation about COVID-19 which has only resulted in unnecessary panic. The authors aim to demonstrate COVID-19 affected media and public opinion in India by considering the actions of the government, existence, and exercise of each party’s rights. The paper concludes with suggestions on the need to balance the exercise of rights during a national crisis, how public opinion plays a vital role in determining the action of the hour and what government can do to prevent chaos.

I. Introduction

The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is the first pandemic in history in which technology and social media are being used on a massive scale to keep people safe, informed, and productive as well as connected.¹ Humans rely on technology as a vehicle through which they are informed about worldly affairs alongside the capacity in which it enables individuals to stay connected. However, the technology that we depend upon has enabled and brought about an ‘infodemic’ of sorts, which has put the global response and measures to control the fast-spreading pandemic in jeopardy. As the coronavirus pandemic clutched India in its vice, there also came an onslaught of misinformation.

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¹ World Health Organisation, ‘Managing the COVID-19 Infodemic: Promoting Healthy Behaviours and Mitigating the Harm from Misinformation and Disinformation’ (23rd September 2020) <<https://www.who.int/news/item/23-09-2020-managing-the-covid-19-infodemic-promoting-healthy-behaviours-and-mitigating-the-harm-from-misinformation-and-disinformation>> accessed February 10, 2020.

Ranging from harmless false cures to dangerous rhetoric targeting minorities, coronavirus-related misinformation as spread virulently to wherever the virus itself did.²

The World Health Organisation (WHO) states that “an infodemic is an overabundance of information, both online and offline.”³ It includes attempts that are made deliberately to circulate information that can be harmful to people’s mental and physical well-being. In the worst-case scenario, it can even undermine public health measures, which can be injurious to the measures taken by public authorities to stop the pandemic. Misinformation and disinformation are not only damaging to mental and physical health but may even cost human lives. Self-medication increased to catastrophic proportions during the COVID-19 pandemic and became a major cause of concern among the medical fraternity. The panic-driven public continues to rely on social media platforms and is turning to various house-hold remedies and self-medication with prescriptions to Covid patients even being shared over WhatsApp.⁴ Moreover, people anxious about developing the infection or even people who had already contacted the infection are taking medication without any medical consultation which has even led to deaths in certain cases.⁵

For every country that has been plagued with the pandemic, these are indeed testing times for their respective governments, health facilities and media companies, as the disease continues to spread at an alarming rate. These unprecedented circumstances present novel challenges to individual countries tactics in combating such a health emergency.

II. COVID-19 and Indian Government’s Steps Towards Tackling Misinformation

In India, a strict nationwide lockdown was announced on 24th March 2020 for three weeks, until April 14, 2020. Only a couple of hours’ worth advance notice was given to the populace before the lockdown was announced, which led to a nationwide panic. There were various reports of people going to markets and hoarding provisions and groceries,⁶ despite recommendations by the Prime Minister of India himself, Mr. Narendra Modi, against doing so. Since all transport services – air, rail and roadways – were suspended, many were left stranded, miles away from their homes.

In India, there is a large influx of migrant labourers who travel from their hometowns and villages to metropolitan cities in search for work. With the announcement of the nationwide lockdown, there was a shortage of work, a circumstance which disproportionately impacted migrant labourers, who now desperately sought to return home. With all modes of transportation halted, the labourers began the long journey back home on foot. On April 15, 2020, Mr. Modi announced that the lockdown would be extended to May 3, 2020, since India was now witnessing a sudden surge of cases. Amidst this development, a few hours after the Prime Minister’s address to the nation, Mumbai’s Bandra railway station saw thousands of migrant labourers at its entrance.⁷

² Samiksha Siwakoti, Kanya Yadav, Nicola Bariletto, Luca Zanotti, Ulas Erdogan, Jacob N. Shapiro, ‘How COVID Drove the Evolution of Fact-checking’ *Harvard Misinformation Review* (May 6, 2021) <https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/how-covid-drove-the-evolution-of-fact-checking/> accessed June 14, 2021.

³ World Health Organisation (NI).

⁴ Dr. R Tickoo, ‘Self-medication for Covid has turned Disastrous. Families must not Assume Doctors’ Role’ *The Print* (May 24, 2021) <<https://theprint.in/opinion/self-medication-for-covid-has-turned-disastrous-families-must-not-assume-doctors-role/663593/>> accessed June 14, 2021.

⁵ S Sirur, ‘WhatsApp ‘Cures’, Easy Access: India’s Hypochondriacs make Self-Medication Deadly 2nd Wave Issue’ *The Print* (June 9, 2021) < <https://theprint.in/health/whatsapp-cures-easy-access-indias-hypochondriacs-make-self-medication-deadly-2nd-wave-issue/674226/>> accessed June 14, 2021.

⁶ R Dasgupta, ‘We Need to be ‘Rational’ not Panicky’ *The Economic Times* (April 4, 2020) < <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/blogs/SilkStalkings/we-need-to-be-rational-not-panicky/?source=app&frmapp=yes>> accessed June 14, 2021.

⁷ G Pandey, ‘Coronavirus in India: Desperate Migrant Workers Trapped in Lockdown’ *BBC News* (April 22, 2020) < <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52360757>> accessed June 14, 2021.

First Information Reports (FIR)⁸ were launched against 2 alleged main perpetrators of spreading misinformation in the Bandra Railway Station case.⁹ The first FIR was launched against Mr. Vinay Dubey, who is a labour activist and allegedly ran a social media campaign for these workers called “Chalo Ghar Ki Ore” (Let’s go home). In one of the videos, he uploaded on his social media, he claimed that he had arranged some forty buses to help the migrants go back home and that he needed permission from the government to operate these buses.¹⁰ The police officials were of the opinion that the migrants responded to Dubey’s videos and therefore had assembled at the railway station.

A second FIR was filed against a news reporter, Mr. Rahul Kulkarni, an ABP correspondent (a private television news channel in India) who had allegedly circulated the news that special trains, which would be used to carry the migrants back to their hometowns, would run on April 14. The police believed that due to the reported circulation of false information, the labourers might have been prompted to gather at the railway station. However, following police investigation, it was found that the “people had misinterpreted and misunderstood Rahul Kulkarni’s news.”¹¹

WhatsApp, a popular instant messaging application, has over 495 million active users in India,¹² and is the most popular messaging application in the country. More than 95 per cent of the monthly active users of the application in India check it at least once a day.¹³ During April, a message went viral on the platform claiming that the Supreme Court of India had made an order declaring that sharing updates of COVID-19 on various social media, including WhatsApp, is a punishable offence and can even lead to police action. Included within the message was a hyperlink attached to it, which directed the person to a report published by Live Law (a leading legal news website in India). There was also a second part of the message, which stated that the 2005 Disaster Management Act had been implemented nationwide and, according to the statute, no citizen was allowed to post, share or forward any COVID-19 related update, as this is considered a punishable offence.¹⁴

The 2005 Disaster Management Act was indeed invoked in the country, however, there is no provision in the statute which states that citizens cannot share updates related to COVID-19. Live Law, on their twitter feed, clarified that the message which was circulated on WhatsApp was fake news. Live Law said that the report had been published on March 31, 2020 and spoke about the Government seeking an order from the Supreme Court that no media outlet should print, publish or telecast anything about COVID-19 without first ascertaining the facts from the mechanism provided by the government.¹⁵

III. Role of Judiciary in Curbing the Spread of Misinformation

The Supreme Court did not pass any order stating that only the Government were allowed to share news or updates on COVID-19. Rather, the Court expressed its concerns about the spread of fake

⁸ Under Section 154 of the Criminal Procedure Code, India is the definition of a FIR. It is a written document prepared by the police when they receive information about the commission of a cognizable offence.

⁹ JP Upadhyay and T Thomas, ‘FIRs Lodged as Potential Reasons Emerge for Chaos at Bandra Station’ *Mint* (April 15, 2020) <<https://www.livemint.com/news/india/three-firs-filed-related-to-chaos-at-bandra-11586933044685.html>> accessed February 10, 2020.

¹⁰ Aditi Chattopadhyay, ‘One Rumour, One Man, One Fake News: 1000s Of Migrant Worker Assemble in Mumbai’ *The Logical Indian* (April 15, 2020) <<https://thelogicalindian.com/news/migrant-workers-fake-news-mumbai-mob-covid-19-lockdown-extension-20616>> accessed February 18, 2021.

¹¹ Sukanya Shantha, ‘Mumbai Police Exonerates Journalist Arrested for ‘Fake News’, Says FIR Based on ‘Mistaken Facts’ *The Wire* (August 8, 2020) <<https://thewire.in/media/mumbai-police-exonerates-journalist-arrested-for-generating-fake-news>> accessed February 23, 2021.

¹² Yasmin Ahmed, ‘WhatsApp May Soon Touch 500 million Users in India despite New Privacy Policy, Claims Report’ *India Today* (January 12, 2021) <<https://www.indiatoday.in/technology/news/story/whatsapp-may-soon-touch-500-million-users-in-india-despite-new-privacy-policy-claims-report-1758344-2021-01-12>> accessed January 18, 2021

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Times Fact Checker, ‘Fake News Alert: No Supreme Court Order Prohibiting Citizens from Sharing Covid-19 Updates’ *Times of India* (April 7, 2020) <<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/times-fact-check/news/fake-alert-no-supreme-court-order-prohibiting-citizens-from-sharing-covid-19-updates/articleshow/75022859>> accessed February 18, 2020.

¹⁵ ‘[Fake News Alert] News That No Person Apart From Govt Is Allowed To Share Or Post COVID-19 Updates Is False’ *LiveLaw* (April 4, 2020) <<https://www.livelaw.in/top-stories/fake-news-alert-news-that-no-person-apart-from-govt-is-allowed-to-share-or-post-covid-19-updates-is-false-154767>> accessed June 15, 2021.

news and urged the media outlets to be careful when they report on the crisis.¹⁶ Despite the clarification, the message was still being widely circulated.

Several petitions were filed before the Supreme Court of India that sought to uphold the welfare of the migrant workers who were stuck in the cities due to the nationwide lockdown measures that has been implemented. While responding to these petitions, the Central Government of India submitted a status report to the Apex Court. The Central Government declared that these were unprecedented times and that any deliberate or unintended fake information or misinformation circulated on various forms of media - print, electronic or social – may generate a sense of panic, which would prove detrimental to everyone. Therefore, given the rapid spread of the disease across the world, and the difficulties countries have faced in containing it, panic caused in even one section of the society could ultimately result in harming the entire nation.¹⁷

The Supreme Court of India, in its final order, stated that they expected the media to maintain a strong sense of responsibility and to ensure that any unverified news capable of causing panic is not disseminated. A daily bulletin by the Government of India to address the doubts of people would be made available within a period of 24 hours after being submitted by the Solicitor General of India. The Apex Court further stated that they did not intend to interfere with the free discussion about the pandemic but would urge the media to refer to and publish the official version of the bulletin.¹⁸

The Supreme Court allowed the Central Government to act accordingly. The Government decided to take the following provisions into account:

- Section 505(1) of Indian Penal Code, 1860: The punishment for making, publishing, or circulating any statement, rumour or report which may cause fear or alarm to the public, or to any section of the public. The punishment for such an act is imprisonment which may extend to 3 years or fine or both.
- Section 66D of Information Technology Act: Whoever, by means for any communication device or computer resource cheats by personating. The punishment for such an act is imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three years and shall also be liable to fine which may extend to one lakh rupees.
- Section 54 of the Disaster Management Act, 2005: Whoever makes or circulates a false alarm or warning as to disaster or its severity or magnitude, leading to panic. The punishment for such an act is Imprisonment which may extend to one year or with fine.¹⁹

This order of the Apex Court created uproar in the media industry, some of whom feel that Indian journalists have been forced to toe the government line on the pandemic and are compelled to report only the government's version of the news. It has also been seen as a move to control independent reportage.²⁰

Rural India was largely protected from the virus. The Government stated that in order to maintain the status quo and prevent the disease from spreading within villages, they were coordinating with various NGOs, religious organisations and companies to provide the migrant workers with basic

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Scroll Staff, 'Covid-19: Centre Urges SC to Bar Media from Publishing Information Not Confirmed by Government' *Scroll* (March 31, 2020) <<https://scroll.in/latest/957834/covid-19-centre-urges-sc-to-bar-media-from-publishing-information-not-confirmed-by-government>> accessed February 20, 2021.

¹⁸ K Rajagopal, 'Coronavirus Supreme Court Upholds Right to Discuss COVID-19' *The Hindu* (March 31, 2020) <<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/coronavirus-supreme-court-upholds-right-to-discuss-covid-19/article31218565.ece>> accessed February 23, 2021.

¹⁹ K Jain and B Singh, 'View: Disinformation in Times of a Pandemic, and the Laws Around it' *The Economic Times* (April 3, 2020) < <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/view-disinformation-in-times-of-a-pandemic-and-the-laws-around-it/articleshow/74960629.cms?from=mdr>> accessed June 15, 2021.

²⁰ N Singh, 'COVID-19 Vs Censorship: SC Asks Media Outlets to Publish Only Official Govt Info, But What About Transparency?' *The Logical Indian* (April 1, 2020) <<https://thelogicalindian.com/news/govt-sc-media-outlets-20407>>> accessed February 23, 2021.

amenities. To prevent this mass exodus of migrant workers back to their villages, a 24/7 control room was set up by the Government. It was submitted by the Central Government to the Supreme Court that relief camps had been set up by state governments and Union Territories, which they are providing food, shelter, and medical facilities to the migrant workers.

Around 666,291 workers were provided shelter and 2,288,279 workers were provided food.²¹ The government believed it would serve the “largest interest of justice”²² for the Supreme Court of India to issue an order which would lead the media to refrain from publishing or telecasting any news “without first ascertaining the true factual position from the separate mechanism” provided by the government itself. The government sought the direction while highlighting that “creation of panic” was an offence under the 2005 Disaster Management Act. The Solicitor General of India, Mr. Tushar Mehta, stated that the central government will provide a bulletin, which, as stated above, would be updated daily with the current coronavirus information. The bulletin would be made available on all media outlets including social media forums.²³

The role of the media is not just to report facts, but also to act as a bridge between the government and the public. It is their duty to hold the government accountable for their actions for the betterment of the society. Media is oftentimes regarded as the fourth pillar of democracy, along with the executive, judiciary and the legislative. In *Indian Express Newspapers v. Union of India*,²⁴ the Supreme Court of India emphasized the importance of freedom of the press. The Court decided that freedom of the press is encompassed within the contours of the ‘freedom of speech and expression’ granted under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution of India. This freedom, the Court explained, means freedom from interference from any authority that could interfere in the content of the newspapers.

IV. Pandemic in a Digital Era: What Happened in India?

On January 30, 2020, the WHO confirmed the novel coronavirus as a “public health emergency” which quickly became a subject of international concern.²⁵ Throughout the first week of February, the news channels, and social media solely highlighted China’s rising number of COVID-19 patients and the commencement of airports screening. On the very same day, the first COVID-19 case in India was reported in the state of Kerala.²⁶ Meanwhile, the media continued to encourage the people to take measures and precautions associated with hygiene. On March 11, 2020, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the WHO.

From this day, mass reporting on COVID-19 began, resulting in extreme anxiety among the masses. It led to people buying face masks, food in large amounts, hand sanitizers and other daily need products as well as the dearth of personal protective equipment (PPE) for health care professionals and workers. Masks and sanitizers were placed under the Essential Commodities Act²⁷ due to the high level of demand.²⁸

²¹ ‘Government Urges Supreme Court To Bar Media From Publishing Covid-19 Info Before Vetting Facts’ *Bloomberg Quint* (March 30, 2020) <<https://www.bloombergquint.com/law-and-policy/centre-seeks-in-sc-no-media-publish-covid-19-info-without-ascertaining-facts-with-govt>> accessed on June 18, 2021.

²²Singh (n21).

²³J Bindra, ‘SC Tells Media to Stick to Official Version on Virus Developments’ *Mint* (April 1, 2020) <<https://www.livemint.com/news/india/sc-tells-media-to-stick-to-official-version-on-virus-developments-11585680253493.html>> accessed February 20, 2021.

²⁴*Indian Express Newspaper v. Union of India* (1986) AIR 515, (1985) SCR (2) 287.

²⁵ World Health Organization ‘Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Report’ (Geneva, WHO, 2020). <<https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200423-sitrep-94-covid-19.pdf>> accessed on January 20, 2021.

²⁶ M Rawat, ‘Coronavirus in India: Tracking Country’s First 50 COVID-19 Cases; What Numbers Tell’ *India Today* (March 12, 2020) <<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/coronavirus-in-india-tracking-country-s-first-50-covid-19-cases-what-numbers-tell-1654468-2020-03-12>> accessed January 5, 2021.

²⁷ The Essential Commodities Act is an act of the Parliament of India that was established to ensure the delivery of certain commodities or products, the supply of which, if obstructed due to hoarding or black marketing, would affect the normal life of the people. This includes medicinal drugs too.

²⁸ ‘Masks, Sanitisers put under Essential Commodities Act’ *The Hindu BusinessLine* (March 13, 2020) <<https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/masks-sanitisers-put-under-essential-commodities-act/article31062832.ece>> accessed on January 10, 2021.

The informative function of the news channels served as one side of the coin. Nonetheless, various television news channels did not step back from spreading rumors such as a Chinese conspiracy being involved in the spread of COVID-19. The reality of India's battle with COVID-19 would not have gained any awareness if it was not for the ground-level journalism by the dedicated reporters and some coverage by social media.

India announced the *Janata* (public) curfew on March 22, 2020, for the entire day. The citizens were asked to beat their *thalis* (plates) from the balcony of their own homes at 5 PM in support, a request made by the Prime Minister of India, Mr. Narendra Modi himself.²⁹ This was done to boost the spirits of frontline health workers. However, this movement was subjected to criticism as it was regarded as a menial gesture with no substantial development in tackling the disease.

In a developing country like India, COVID-19 is a grave peril and thus various coherent measures, and truthful dialogues must be anticipated from the center, which cannot be brushed away from the critical radar of reporting. The government has established a "Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations (PM-CARES) Fund" to fight the pandemic and several business conglomerates and citizens have donated to the fund.³⁰ However, the requirement of this fund has been deemed as problematic, as another Prime Minister Relief Fund had already been in existence since 1948. The authors are of the belief that these are the kinds of questions that ask for serious journalistic analysis.

Unaided, the COVID-19 pandemic bought the world to its knees, to a complete standstill, confining people within their own homes. There is no doubt that the pandemic managed to engender a great deal of chaos, but it must be highlighted that it is the social media platforms that aggravated its intensity. People were and still are eager to be updated with relevant information and learn how various nations across the world are trying to deal with the pandemic. The news channels proved to be an important source of deriving that information; however, one must remember that this is a pandemic which is taking place in a digital era. The lockdown has naturally increased people's consumption of media yet available sources are distant from the truth and do not further a significant balanced dialogue. To a certain extent, the media has developed itself into a gizmo of half-truths and sensationalism.

More than news channels, the social media played a key role in shaping the minds of the public. Social Media is a free space, which allows for largely unfettered freedom of expression, however, there is a distinction between the *truth* and *perception of the truth*. The numerous comments and theories surrounding COVID-19 have been pushed far ahead by the people, which has only resulted in misinformation and fear.³¹ The relation between the different kinds of media and what effect it has on the general population has been studied and a report published in the Electronic Journal of General Medicine (EJGM). The team used a scale to determine the influence of media and deduced that primarily three factors have an impact on people – amplification of information by the media, any information received from family, friends or a health personnel and generated apprehension.³² It is clear that bogus information can be ruinous due to its capacity to spread quickly and easily through social media.³³

According to a study conducted by Team-C Voter, it was found that before the lockdown was declared on March 22, 2020, around 35% of Indians feared that they or someone in their family might get infected by COVID-19. After the declaration of the lockdown, this number rose. In April

²⁹ Express Web Desk, "From Clapping to Beating Thalís, How People Responded to PM Modi's Call on 'Janata Curfew'" *The Indian Express* <<https://www.indianexpress.com/article/coronavirus/watch-janata-curfew-claps-ringing-bells-pm-modi-6326761>> accessed on January 10, 2021.

³⁰ (*PM CARES Fund - PM's Citizen Assistance & Relief in Emergency Situations Fund*) <<http://www.pmcare.gov.in/>> accessed January 28, 2021.

³¹ Murali Krishnan 'COVID: Misinformation Complicates India's Fight Against Pandemic' *DW* (March 03, 2021) <<https://www.dw.com/en/india-covid-misinformation/a-57414876>> accessed on February 23, 2021.

³² CR Mejia, D Ticona, JF Rodriguez-Alarcon, AM Campos Urbina, JB Catay-Medina, T Porta-Quinto, et al, 'The Media and their Informative Role in the Face of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): Validation of Fear Perception and Magnitude of the Issue (MED-COVID-19)', *Electron J Gen Med* (2020) Issue 17, 239.

³³ Srijan Kumar, Neil Shah, Raton Boca 'False Information on Web and Social Media: A Survey' (2018) 1 ArXiv 1

and May, the fraction of respondents who assumed that someone in their family or themselves could get infected by COVID-19 remained stable at around 40-45%.³⁴ The number of Indians who thought that someone in their family or themselves could get infected by the COVID-19 was found to peak in the month of July, the month in which India had confirmed more COVID-19 than in all preceding months put collectively.

In stating these numbers, the worst days of the pandemic coincided with the peak fear amongst citizens of the contagion. The relevant information allows people to deal with the circumstances in front of them. However, when the same information is served with additional irrelevant and falsified comments, theories, or rumors, it is distorted resulting in increased unrest.

V. Conclusion

According to the above stated survey, in total, Indians had an optimistic reaction to the government's way of tackling the COVID-19 crisis. During the time of Janata Curfew, approximately 75% of Indians thought that the government was managing the COVID-19 crisis quite well. After the pronouncement of the first country-wide lockdown, this figure rose progressively. Thus, by the month of April, over 93% of the respondents stated a positive approval towards the government's management concerning the crisis. This soaring approval was constant till the end of May. The same percentage saw its first decline when the government declared the unlock phases in June. However, it again became stable in July through September at around 80%.³⁵

If one were to prima facie observe the situation, he or she would find that the present crisis in India is driven by the disease itself. However, the authors find it pertinent to note that due to compromised truth and disempowering communication, fear and panic among the public only increased.³⁶ The pandemic is life threatening and has severely affected the economy³⁷, damage which will continue to persist even when the disease is eradicated. This calls for a methodical research which runs in parallel to the narratives provided to the public by the officials.

The media has witnessed an exceptional rate of development throughout the last thirty decades. The responsibility of larger media as discovered throughout the pandemic is not a sudden shift. It is one which has been noticeable for a good time now. Consequently, India has taken a step forward to become one of the leading media markets in the world. The association between main spiritual extremism and neo-liberalism has also contributed towards shaping it. It has been observed that revenues, the endorsement of majoritarian outlook and the omission of the say of the marginalized communities might have become its key traits.

At the heart of any democratic state is a well-informed populace who are empowered to make choices and hold its government to account. That is why it is crucial for a democracy to have a free press. It is the vehicle through which ideas are argued upon, strategies are articulately formulated, and disputes are resolved.

Freedom of speech and press is vital to maintain for the media outlets, but it is also the responsibility of the government to ensure that right information is passed along, especially in times of crisis. For example, the Modi regime notably requested the Supreme Court to enforce a countrywide censorship on the publication of "false or inaccurate" data. Though the Apex Court did not comply

³⁴S Maskara, "Coronavirus and Public Opinion: Changes in 6 Months of Lockdown" *The Daily Guardian* (September 9, 2020) <<https://theguardian.com/coronavirus-and-public-opinion-changes-in-6-months-of-lockdown/>> accessed January 15, 2021.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Murali Krishnan, 'Misinformation Dominates India's Social Media Landscape in Covid Surge' *Rfi* (May 12, 2021) <<https://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20210512-misinformation-dominates-india-s-media-landscape-in-covid-surge>> accessed June 15, 2021.

³⁷ Koustav Das, 'Explained: How Covid-19 Battered Indian Economy During 2nd Wave' *India Today* (June 04, 2021) <<https://www.indiatoday.in/business/story/explained-how-covid-19-battered-indian-economy-during-2nd-wave-1810532-2021-06-03>> accessed June 15, 2021.

with their request, they did mandate the media companies to put up facts from the “official version” of incidents.

On April 25, 2021, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) called for social media outlets such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to take down about 100 posts and parts of content where it was alleged that the information was “*unrelated, old and out of the context images or visuals, communally sensitive posts and misinformation about COVID19 protocols*”. It is true that freedom of speech is a fundamental right, but it is not absolute. Here, the legitimate concern of the government is regarding the ways in which any information of misleading nature can impact the public.³⁸

The true spirit of a democracy lies in respecting the voices of the citizens and ensuring their rights - such as the right of freedom of expression and opinion. Public opinion plays a vital role in determining the action of the hour and allows the government to plan accordingly. However, a number of factors often influence public opinion - one of the primary factors being news and social media platforms. According to the data released by Broadcast Audience Research Council India (BARC), the world’s largest television measurement science industry body, news consumption across languages grew by 298% in India after the initial lockdown period of 21 days.³⁹ With such spike in news consumption, it becomes the paramount responsibility of the media companies to share information that is correct and true. It should help people understand the motives of the government, whilst affording emphasis and coverage to genuine issues that might be missed by the government and providing criticism when the acts of the government detrimentally effect the population.

In such testing times like that of a global pandemic, media platforms should acknowledge their responsibilities in helping users distinguish misinformation from facts. For example, Instagram announced that they would remove COVID-19 accounts from recommendations, unless posted by a credible health organization.⁴⁰ Media not only plays the important role of a watchdog to keep a check on the government, but also plays a crucial role in disseminating health information and tackling infodemics and misinformation.

³⁸ Aashish Aryan, ‘IT Ministry asks Social Media Cos to Remove More Posts, Alleges Content ‘Spreading Misinformation’ about Covid-19’ *Indian Express* (25 April 2021) < <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/it-ministry-asks-social-media-cos-to-remove-more-posts-alleges-content-spreading-misinformation-about-covid-7288374/> > accessed June 16, 2021.

³⁹ L Jha, ‘Covid-19 impact: TV News Viewership Grows 298%’ *Live Mint* (April 2, 2020) < <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/covid-19-impact-tv-news-viewership-grows-298-11585831965286.html> > accessed June 20, 2021.

⁴⁰ H Sheth, ‘Instagram Rolls out New Features to Provide Covid-19 Information’ *The Hindu BusinessLine* (December 18, 2020) < <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/info-tech/social-media/instagram-rolls-out-new-features-to-provide-covid-19-information/article33362520.ece> > accessed June 23, 2021.