

# Media Pluralism: A Study of Select Regional News Channels

Mahvish Rahman

**Abstract-** There are over 300 channels in India, out of which around 77 are news channels. The private electronic media, particularly the television news media, which is a creature of the 1990s, is still evolving and maturing. Of late, the private news broadcasters, either under an umbrella network or as a single-unit, are turning towards niche audience and therefore, a mushrooming of regional news channels. Owing to the plethora of news channels, it is expected that diverse viewpoints be represented but studies have also shown that since the private news broadcasters are owned by big corporate houses, these channels are actually creating a 'façade of media plurality'. The access to independent and pluralistic media and the representation of the full spectrum of views, interests and concerns prevalent in the society are the prerequisites of a successful democracy. This study will map content of two regional news channels and explore if plurality is actually practiced or the dominant viewpoints telecast.

**Key Words:** Media Pluralism, Indian media, regional news channels.

## Introduction

Asia has witnessed a profound transformation of its media landscape since the mid-1980s when deregulation of state television monopolies resulted in a dramatic growth in commercial television outlets. Cable and satellite television have since proliferated at a phenomenal rate providing Asians with a wide range of television channels.<sup>1</sup>

In any given week in India, there could be about 500 million people watching television. This big sea of consumers is still expanding. The private electronic media, particularly the television news media, which is a creature of the 1990s, is still evolving and maturing. There are over 300 channels in India, out of which around 77 are news channels<sup>2</sup>. Of late, the private news broadcasters, either under an umbrella network or as a single-unit, are turning towards niche audience and therefore, a mushrooming of regional news channels. Owing to the plethora of news channels, it is expected that diverse viewpoints be represented but studies have also shown that since the private news broadcasters are owned by big corporate houses, these channels are actually creating a 'façade of media plurality'<sup>3</sup>.

This paper will study if plurality is actually practiced or is media concentrated in the hands of a few. For a democracy to function efficiently, it is imperative that it has a dynamic and diverse media sector, both in terms of ownership and in content. The access to independent and pluralistic media and the representation of the full spectrum of views, interests and concerns prevalent in the society are the prerequisites of a successful democracy.

## Objectives

This study will look at the pluralistic character of the news broadcast by two regional channels in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India and whether it is helping in the widening of media diversity. It will map the content of an Urdu News Channel, Aalami Sahara and a Hindi News Channel, GNN News. This paper intends to:

- Examine the extent to which diversity is practiced;
- Explore political pluralism by mapping the castes and gender of actors in the news channels;
- Analyse geographical pluralism by studying the origin news themes across the news channels;
- Study the styles of reporting news and

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events;

- Evaluate the ad sources and product categories of the news channels.

### **India's Television History**

India's television history can be divided into three broad phases<sup>4</sup>. The first phase, from 1960 until the 1980s, saw the employment of television as a socio-economic educational project for villagers in India and later as a state propaganda tool for nation-building. In the second phase, through the 1980s, the state retained control of the airwaves but allowed commercial engagement with the private sector, legitimizing entertainment as a viable ambition of television content. In the third era, post liberalization, the state ceded control of the medium, which was in the hands of the private sector saw an astonishing growth that has shown no signs of abating. In such a scenario, it becomes imperative to understand whether Indian news media, with a mushrooming of news channels, is pluralistic in nature and diverse in character.

### **Media Pluralism**

Curran and Gurevitch<sup>5</sup> provide a useful definition of the pluralist point of view regarding media:

“The pluralists see society as a complex of competing groups and interests, none of them predominant all the time. Media organizations are seen as bounded organizational systems, enjoying an important degree of autonomy from the state, political parties and institutionalized pressure groups. Control of the media is said to be in the hands of an autonomous managerial élite who allow a considerable degree of flexibility to media professionals.”

Media Pluralism therefore highlights<sup>3</sup>:

- pluralist view that the media are independent;
- the independence of media from the government, pressure groups and big conglomerations;
- the relative independence of journalists in writing their articles;
- media freedom by reducing media ownership concentration, and by supporting more and diverse media voices;
- editorial independence in the mass media by

supporting the efforts of journalists and media professionals to work freely and to resist all forms of internal and external pressure that undermine the quality and ethical standing of media

- public engagement with media and policymakers in order to develop a more balanced, accessible and democratic media system;
- a comprehensive strategy for diversity to help media meet the challenge of improving levels of diversity, both in content and within media institutions, and among broadcasters;
- awareness of minority concerns and cultural identity among media professionals, and to promote dialogue between media and representatives of different communities.

Using the term media pluralism can be a useful way of acknowledging that there are different types of media diversity. Media pluralism can include both internal features of the market, such as the level of diversity in available content, and external features, such as the concentration of ownership. Pluralism is also a useful term to highlight geographical diversity, and the different challenges that face various markets. For example, a rural community with access to only one local newspaper may appear to have a limited range of voices. However, that community will also have access news and information sources via other platforms, such as online, radio or TV.

### **Methodology**

This study will explore diversity in terms of content and access to different points of views. Uttar Pradesh has been chosen as the area of study as it has a huge population which consumes news voraciously in the Urdu-Hindi language. Its importance also stems from the fact that it is geographically closer to the capital of the country, Delhi and therefore is active in the larger political sphere. It has a diverse population too in terms of caste, ethnicity and religion.

'Aalami Sahara', a 24x7 Urdu News Channel and GNN News, a 24x7 Hindi News Channel have been undertaken for the study. 'Aalami Sahara' has been chosen as it is the first privately owned

national Urdu news channel. 'GNN News' as it is one of the leading news channels of core Hindi-speaking belts of the country with a focus on rural development.

Prime time news bulletins (30 minutes each) broadcast during week days on the said channels were recorded for three weeks and the recorded news was mapped under different parameters.

On the basis of these parameters, news for a period of 15 days was mapped and analyzed.

S. No.	Channel Name	Time Line	Time Slot	Frequency
1.	Aalami Sahara	27 <sup>th</sup> - 31 <sup>st</sup> August, 2012	09:00-	5 times/week
		3 <sup>rd</sup> - 7 <sup>th</sup> September, 2012	09:30pm	
		10 <sup>th</sup> -14 <sup>th</sup> September, 2012		
2.	GNN News	27 <sup>th</sup> - 31 <sup>st</sup> August, 2012	08:00-	5 times/week
		3 <sup>rd</sup> - 7 <sup>th</sup> September, 2012	08:30	
		10 <sup>th</sup> -14 <sup>th</sup> September, 2012	pm	

This study will examine the different points of views based on the following parameters:

- 1) **News Themes:** Political, Social, Business & Finance, Entertainment, Sports, Miscellaneous.
- 2) **News Sub-Themes:**
  - (a) **Political: Functioning of Political Party,** Funtioning of the Organ of States, Protest & Demonstration , Conflict/Terror/War, Corruption/Scam.
  - (b) **Social:** Cultural/Religious, Crime/Social Conflict, Welfare/Health/Education/Sanitation etc, Environment/Natural Disaster
  - (c) **Business & Finance:** Functioning of Government/Regulation/Debates, Corporate & Financial Markets
  - (d) **Entertainment:** Bollywood, Non-Bollywood
  - (e) **Sports:** Cricket, Non-Cricket
  - (f) **Miscellaneous**
- 3) **Geographical origin of News:** Central U.P., Eastern U.P., Western U.P., Other States, National and International.
- 4) **Voices of people:** Ruling party, Opposition, Government Officials, Experts, Identity Groups, Activist groups and Vox Populi.
- 5) **Caste of Voices:** Brahmin, Kshatriyas,

Vaishyas, Ashrafs, OBCs, SC/STs.

- 6) **Religion of Voices:** Majority, Minority: Sikh, Christian, Buddhist, Jain, Others.
- 7) **Story treatment:** Reporter from location/PTC, Reporter over Phone, Panel, Studio Interview/Location Interview, Anchor over Pictures (Including Agency), Anchor reads (without pictures), Others.
- 8) **Advertisements:** (a) Public, Private (b) Product Catogories of advertisement: Business & Finance, Food & Beverages, Consumer Durables, FMCG, Non-Financial Services, Others.

### Brief Background of the Channels

#### Aalami Sahara

Sahara News Network launched its Urdu news channel 'Aalami Sahara'- a 24x7 News Channel on 27th December 2010. It is India's first privately owned National Urdu news channel. It is a free to air channel that broadcasts news across 54 countries.<sup>7</sup>

The company is a part of business conglomerate 'Sahara India' owned by Subrata Roy, which publishes an Urdu daily 'Roznama Rashtriya Sahara', a weekly-magazine 'Aalami Sahara' and a monthly- tabloid 'Bazm-e-sahara'. Sahara News Network runs the national Hindi news channel, Samay, along with 36 city-specific regional news channels under the brand name, Sahara Samay.

#### GNN News

GNN News is a 24x7 Hindi news channel catering essentially to the core Hindi speaking belts of India- Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, Delhi and NCR and Western Uttar Pradesh. It was launched on 20th June, 2011 with an aim to make it a one-stop shop for fiction and non-fiction entertainment. It aimed to provide information related to agricultural developments, climate, science and technology and folk entertainment (focus on rural audience).<sup>8</sup>

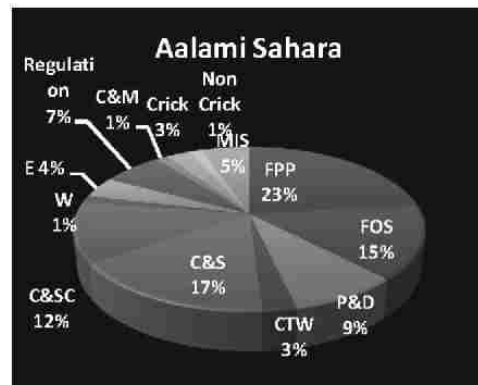
GNN News is owned by GN Group (Chairman Mr. S. S. Randhawa) which is a multi-disciplinary and multi-faceted corporate group having diversified bearings in different fields.

## Findings from the Variables/Themes Aalami Sahara

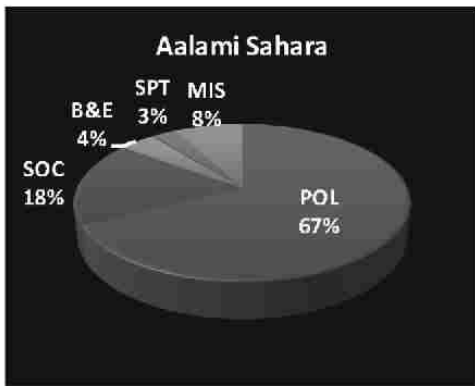
*Proportion of News Themes in Headlines*



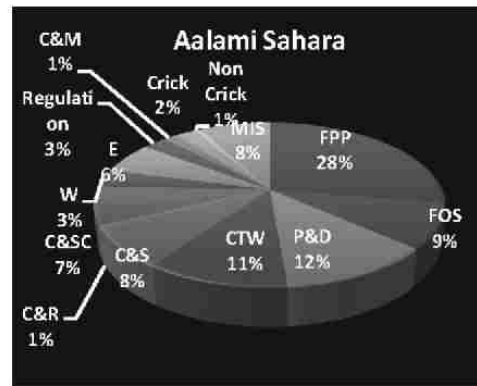
*Proportion of News Sub-themes in Headlines*



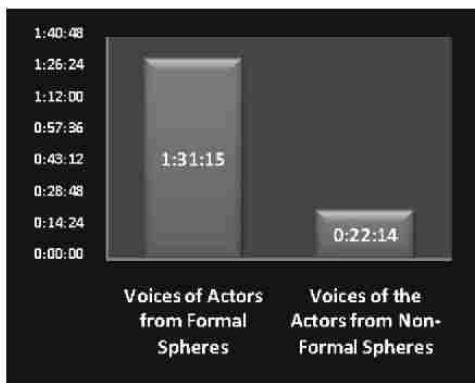
*Proportion of News Stories under Various News Themes*



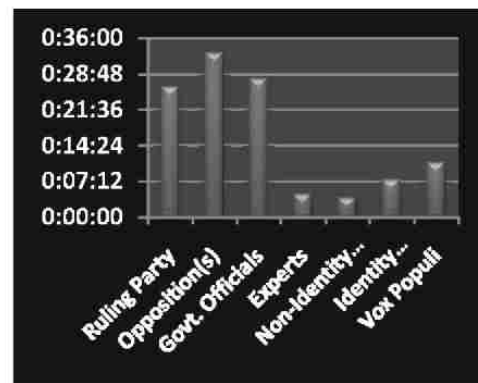
*Proportion of News Stories of Various Subthemes in Entire Bulletin*



*Profile of Time Given to Voices*



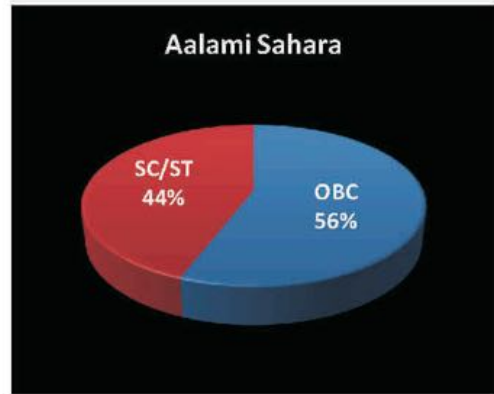
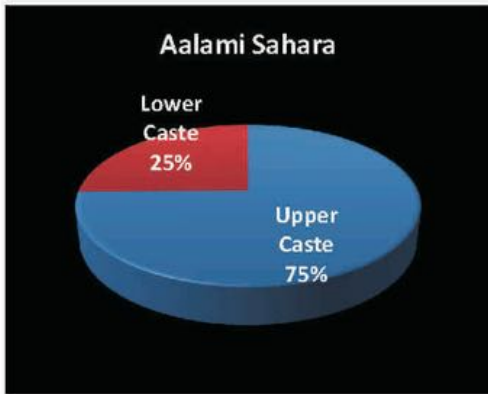
*Profile of Time Given to Sub-themes of Voices*



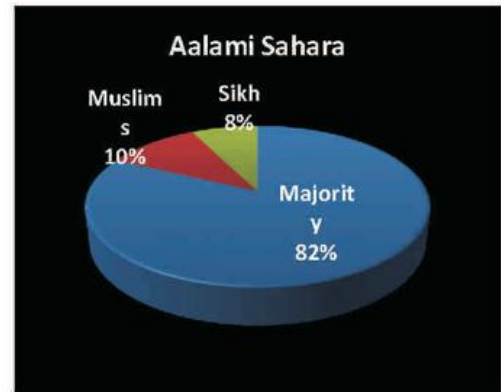
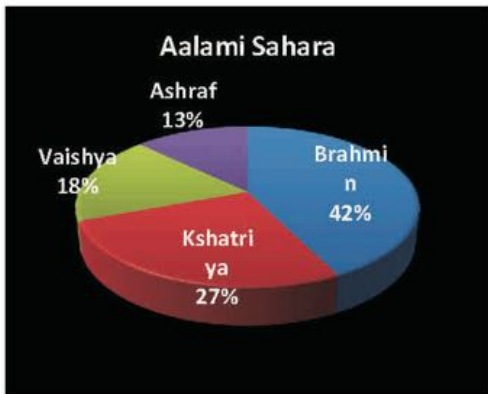
*Proportion of Actors among Castes*

*Proportion of Actors among Lower Caste*



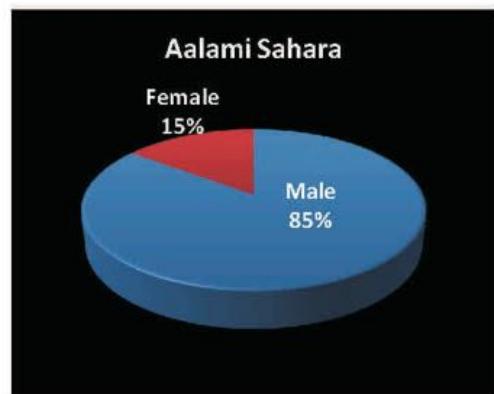
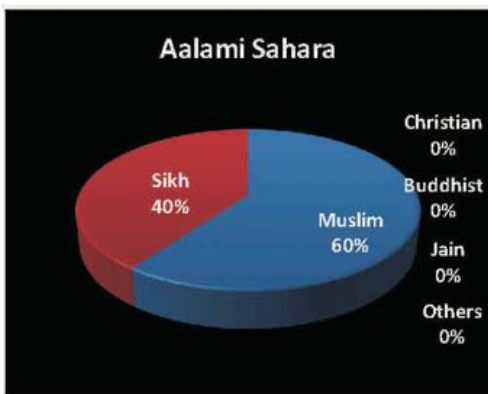


*Proportion of Actors among Upper Caste  
Proportion of Class of Actors in News Stories*

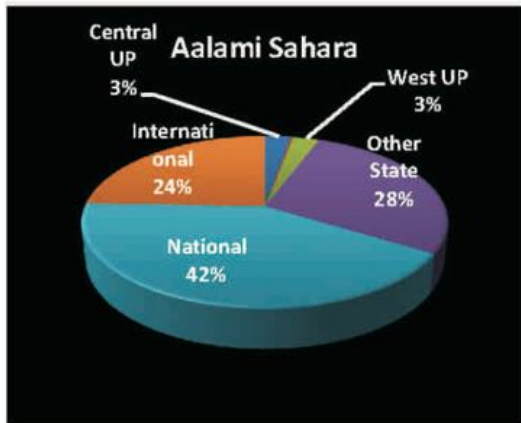


*Proportion of Minorities*

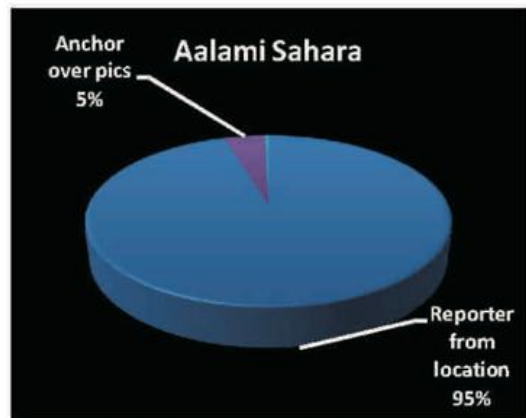
*Proportion of Gender of Actors*



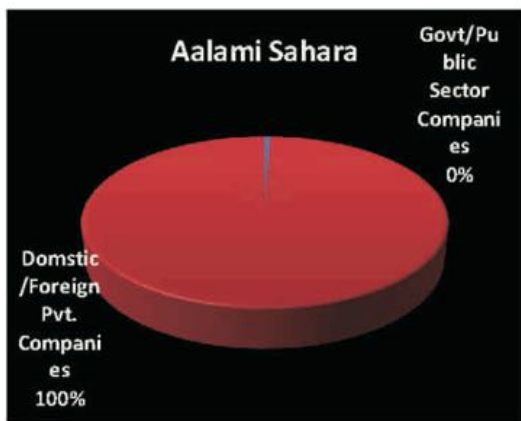
Proportion of Origin of News in News Stories



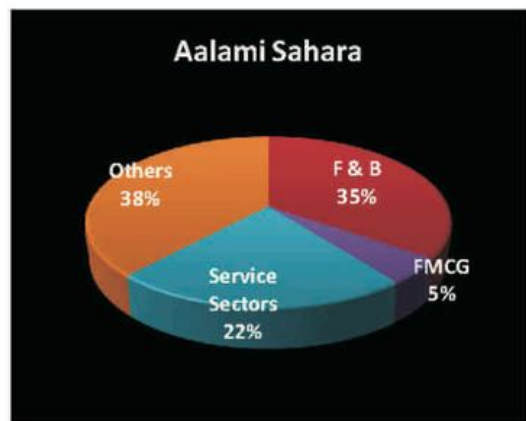
Story Treatment



Advertisement Source



Product Category



### Observations

In U.P., 'Aalami Sahara' gives the biggest pie to 'Political News' in headlines implying that the channel is not diverse in terms of the news themes covered in headlines. In news sub-themes of headlines also, the channel gives the maximum pie to 'Functioning of Political Parties' among 'Political News'.

In the news stories dealt with in the bulletin, it again reflects that the channel is inclined towards 'Political News'. In the news sub-themes, we find that it deals with 'Functioning of Political Parties', 'Conflict', 'Crime', 'Corruption' and so on.

By giving a huge proportion to 'Voices of Actors

from Formal Sphere' than to 'Voices of Actors from Non-Formal Sphere', 'Aalami Sahara' reflects that it is not diverse in terms of voices and it depends upon the powerful and high-ranked officials for statements and opinion formation. However, among the 'Formal' sphere voices, it gives almost an equal chance for the actors to express themselves, indicating that it is not pro any side and gives an almost equal weight age to all viewpoints. It telecasts more voices of 'Vox-Populi' from 'Non-Formal' Sphere.

The caste representation is also not diverse in this channel as the 'Upper Caste' gets three times more representation than the 'Lower Caste'. Even among the upper castes, there is hierarchy as the 'Brahmins' who are at the top in the caste ladder

are represented the most than the 'Kshatriyas' and 'Vaishyas'. Among the class of actors, majority gets a much higher representation than minorities like Muslims and Sikh.

Among the Minorities, Muslims get the maximum representation followed by Sikhs and it is the same faces among them who figure time and again. Male voices are heard far more than Female voice. Only when there are issues directly related to women do we find a female voice. Thus, 'Aalami Sahara' does not represent gender proportionally.

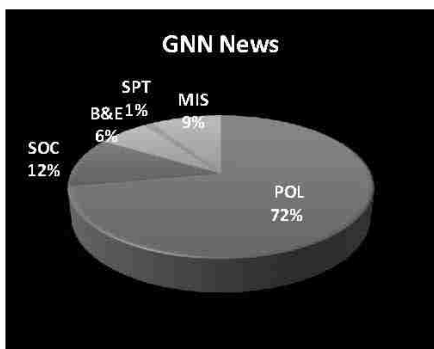
'Aalami Sahara' being a national news channel, telecasts mostly 'National' news. However, news of 'International' origin is adequately represented. News from 'Other States' gets covered but it is again mostly from north Indian

states.

The style of news gathering is mostly 'Reporter from Location' implying that the channel has reporters to cover most of their stories. Other modes of news gathering like, 'Reporter over Phone', 'Panel/Studio Interview/Location Interview', 'Anchor reads (without pictures)' and so on are not used.

All the advertisements on 'Aalami Sahara' are from 'Domestic/Foreign Companies' and no 'Government/Public Sector' advertisements are seen. Amongst the products advertised, the biggest share is to 'Others which is Self-promotion/Other Channel Programs' followed by 'Service Sector' while 'Business & Finance' and 'Consumer Durables' do not get any share.

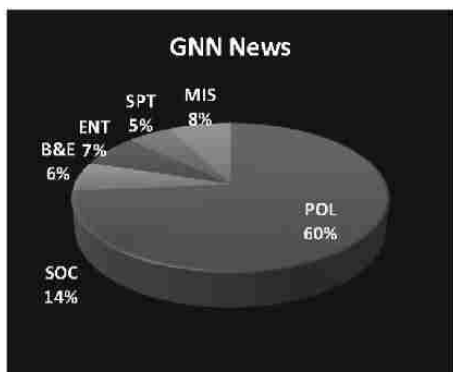
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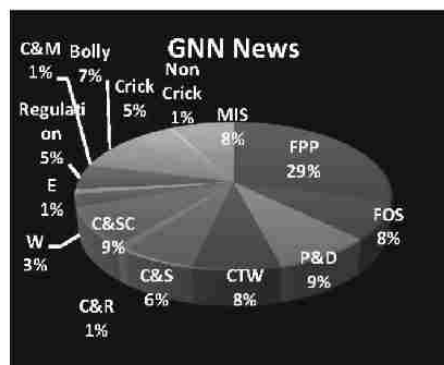
*Proportion of News Sub-themes in Headlines*



*Proportion of News Stories under Various News Themes*

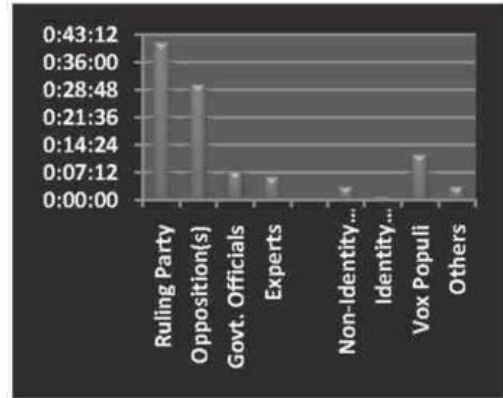
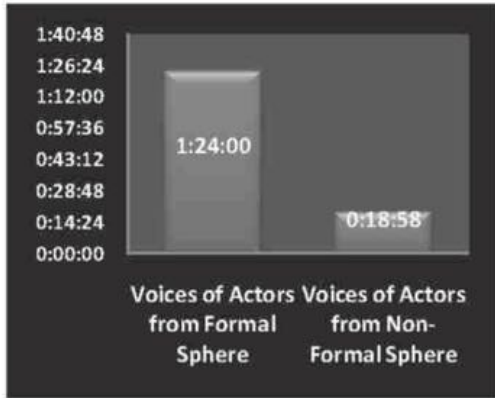


*Proportion of News Stories of Entire Bulletin*



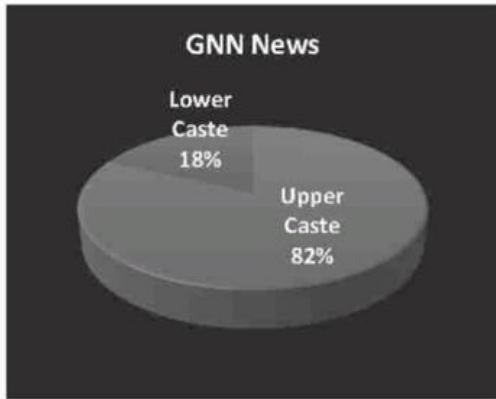
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*Profile of Time Given to Sub-themes of Voices*



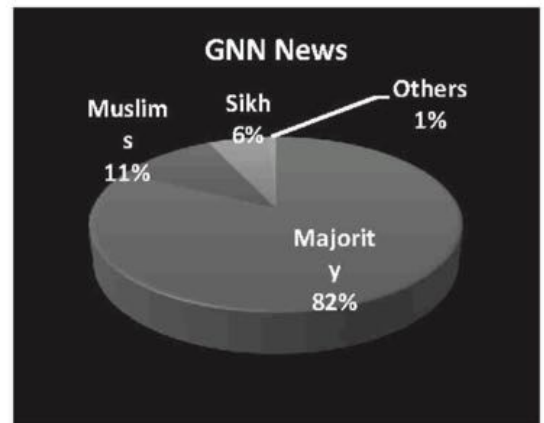
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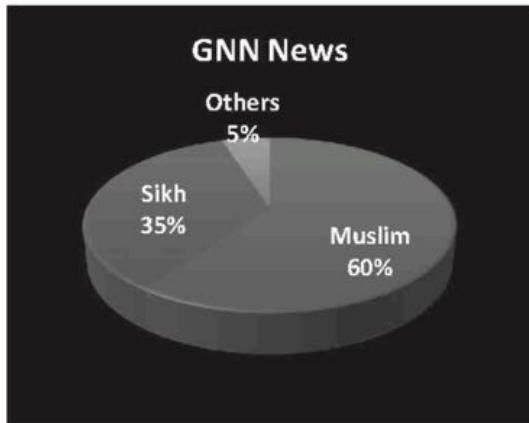
*Proportion of Actors among Upper Caste*

*Proportion of Class of Actors in News Stories*

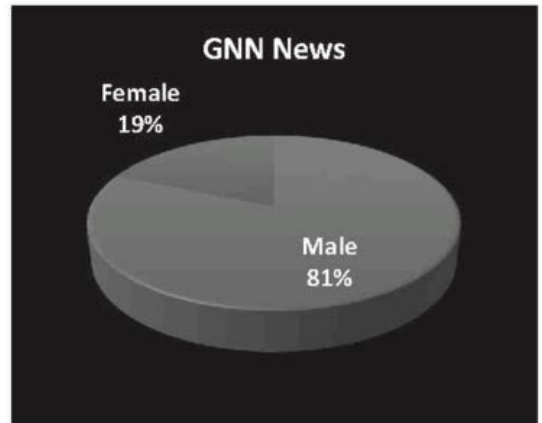




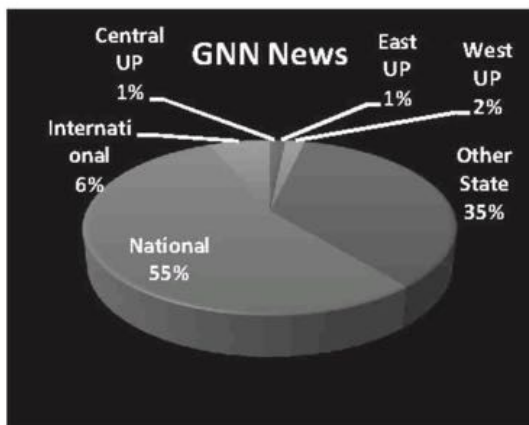
Proportion of Minorities



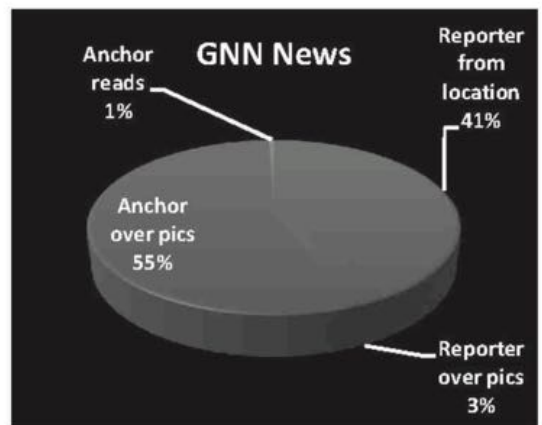
Proportion of Genders of Actors



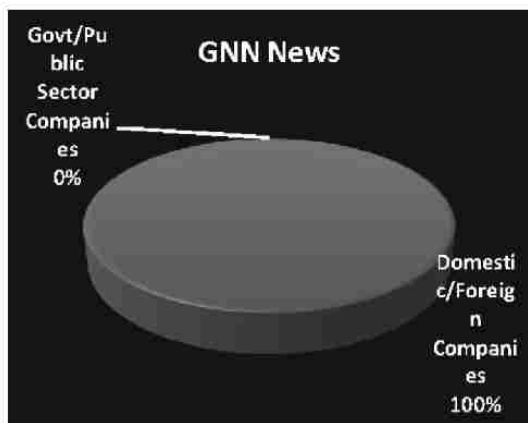
Proportion of Origin of News in News Stories



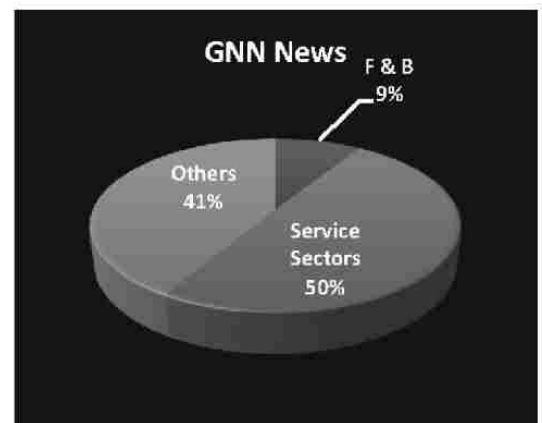
Story Treatment



Advertisement Source



Product Category



## **Observations**

In the state of U.P., 'GNN News' is biased towards 'Political' news in headlines. It's very little share is given to other news themes like 'Social, 'Business and Economics' and 'Sports'.

In news sub-themes in headlines too, the channel gives the maximum share to the 'Functioning of the political parties'.

Even in the entire bulletin, the channel is not diverse in terms of the news themes dealt with as it still is inclined towards political news. 'Sports News' is telecast more in the bulletin implying that the channel assumes that the Hindi-speaking public would be interested to know about the sports world. An important change which figures here is that 'Entertainment News', which was absent in the headlines figures at the end of each bulletin and it deals with news related to Bollywood.

'GNN News' is also biased towards actors of 'Formal' Sphere, that is politicians and officials and it seems to give very little space to the voice of the powerless. Even among the powerful, it is largely pro-establishment. Bollywood directors and actors are given space to be heard. The channel tries to incorporate voices of the common people but it is very less, thus the ideal of diversity is not fulfilled.

'GNN News' is highly biased towards the actors of Upper Caste as it gets a much higher representation. Among the Lower Castes, OBCs are represented much more than SC/STs.

Amongst the minorities, Muslims get represented most followed by Sikhs by the same actors who figure again and again and take decisions on the behalf of the entire community.

Among the genders, males get a much higher representation than females. Some voices of female Bollywood stars are heard. Voices of common women are rarely heard. Thus 'GNN News' is not diverse in the representation of gender.

Among the 'Geographical origins of news', 'GNN

News' has mostly 'National' news and news from 'Other States'. There is a lack of news from 'Central U.P.' and 'Eastern U.P.' because the channel concentrates on 'Western U.P.' still the news from there is very less. Also, the news from U.P. is more about crime and accidents than about politics.

A major chunk of news treatment is 'Anchor over pics' indicating the reliance of the channel on pictures available from news agencies to make news and telecast it. 'Reporter from Location' is used for news related to politics and Bollywood

The advertisement sources in 'GNN News' are all of GNN and no ads from Government/PSU can be seen. 'Others' which is Self-promotion/other channel programs also occupies a big pie. 'FMCG', 'Business & Finance' and 'Consumer Durables' do not get any share.

## **Inferences**

- Both 'Aalami Sahara' and 'GNN News' give the highest pie to 'Political News' in Headlines. This clearly states the bias which is present among channels of both the languages towards political news. Therefore, we can deduce that Indian news media is inclined towards political news and equates politics with news. It also co-relates to U. P. being a politically active state (due to its proximity to Delhi) and therefore, it reflects on the kind of news shown on the channels.
- Both the channels give a little share in headlines to news in 'Social,' 'Business and Economics', and 'Sports.' This also reflects that the Indian news media does not consider it worthwhile incorporating these themes for Prime-time news. 'GNN News' which covers 'Entertainment' in its bulletins does not show it in its headlines. This means that the Hindi-speaking population of U.P. would like to get some entertainment news but it is not preferred in the headlines while it is completely absent in the Urdu channel 'Aalami Sahara'.
- Among news sub-themes in headlines, both the channels give a greater share to

'Functioning of Political Parties'. It means that the news channels deem it important to let people know of the activities of different political parties of the state. After that news again from the political theme, that is, 'Functions of organs of the state' and 'Corruption' are covered reflecting that people would be more interested in news related to dramatic things like crime, conflict and corruption.

- In tandem with the headlines, among the News Stories, both the channels give the greatest share to 'Political News'. This again reinforces the proposition that people in U.P. are much more interested to know about news stories related to Political News. The difference is in the share given to 'Social News'. 'Aalami Sahara' deals with it in its bulletins to an acceptable length. However, 'GNN News' which was launched with the motto of delivering news related to social development does not deal with 'Social News' in its bulletin to a great extent. It gives an equivalent share to 'Entertainment News': 'Cricket' and 'Bollywood' to a greater extent, befitting its objective of being a one-stop shop of fiction and non-fiction entertainment.
- Among the news sub-themes in bulletin, 'Environment' and 'Health' get a bigger pie in 'Aalami Sahara'. It reflects that 'Aalami Sahara' gives a more diverse viewpoint in terms of news as it also gives news related to such social issues. On the other hand, 'GNN News', which neither mentions any of its stakeholders on the website nor has issued any annual reports, seems to have been launched by the GNN Group for the purpose of diversifying one's interest in the media field rather than act as a watchdog. Although at the time of its launch, it claimed that it would cater to agricultural developments, climate, science and technology and folk entertainment (focus on rural audience), there was no news related to these aspects.
- 'Protests and Demonstration' gets a bigger pie in 'Aalamai Sahara' owing to its share of

'International' protests (because of the American film 'Innocence of Muslims'). It brings out an interesting relationship between the watchers of 'Aalami Sahara' and International news as there seems to be an unspoken interest of the Urdu-speaking population of U.P. towards issues related to Islam and to American news in particular.

- Both the channels give greater proportion of time to 'Voices from Formal Sphere' meaning there is not much space for the common public to make its voice heard. It is the politicians and people in power who are heard for a long time again and again. 'GNN News' gives a high share to actors from 'Ruling Party' and 'Government Officials' are not largely heard. It hints that GNN is pro-establishment and other voices from formal sphere are not catered to. 'Aalami Sahara' gives slightly higher share to 'Opposition' as compared to 'Ruling Party' and this could mean that it tries to give a fair representation. In the 'Non-Formal Sphere', 'Vox-Populi' is heard the most in both the channels indicating that there is some air time for the common public to express its viewpoints.
- Among the castes, both the channels give much higher representation to voices from 'Upper Caste' as compared to 'Lower Caste'. Among the Voices of 'Lower Caste', OBCs get more representation as compared to SC/ST. This clearly reflects the bias prevalent in the Indian news media supporting the caste system. Lower Castes are still struggling to make their voices heard and among the lower castes, SC/STs are not heard adequately. Among the upper castes, equal representation to voices from 'Brahmin' in both 'Aalami Sahara' and 'GNN News'. Kshatriyas and Vaishyas voices are heard lesser as compared to Brahmins and this again is in sync with the hierarchy of the Indian caste system. The Upper Caste Muslims 'Ashraf' are given a low representation in both the channels. This reiterates a prominent notion of the Indian media system that it is dominated by Upper caste Hindus and low-caste or minority

voices are less heard.

- Vaishyas' and 'SC/STs' are represented more in 'Aalami Sahara' than in 'GNN News'. It reflects that between the two, 'Aalami Sahara' tries to give more representation to marginalized voices and tries to cater to diverse viewpoints in its news-making business.
- Both the channels represent the classes, minorities and genders almost similarly. Actors from majority are heard the most in both the channels. Among the minorities, Muslims and Sikhs are heard while there is absolutely no representation from other minority communities like Christians, Buddhists, Jains and so on. This clearly shows how mainstream media sidelines other voices of the country. Women are represented by a very low proportion in both the channels. This reinforces the proposition that Indian news media is dominated by Hindu males. Rarely do we find a minority voice, especially of a woman heard. Thus, we find that there is no political pluralism in these channels.
- National' News gets maximum visibility in both the channels however the share of national news in 'GNN News' is much more. News from other states gets more represented in 'GNN News'. 'Aalami Sahara' gives a big share to 'International' news, owing to the worldwide protests against the American film 'Innocence of Muslims' by the Muslim world. News from U. P. gets marginal visibility in both the channels. The study finds that most of the news is related to politics and therefore from the capital of the country, Delhi. That is why, the variable 'Other States' which includes Delhi, has a big count in both the channels. Also, 'National' news is also generally about Judiciary and Legislative bodies which are mostly situated in Delhi, therefore the news boils down to the maximum from Delhi. Although the channels cater to U.P. which is a big Hindi, Urdu-speaking belt, there is not much news from this state. Other states of the country, mostly North India, figure only in terms of mishap or protests. Thus we find that there is not much geographical pluralism in the channels. News is mostly from Delhi and North India and other parts of the country are rarely mentioned.
- Aalami Sahara' employs 'Reporters from location' for all their news coverage. It means that it has the resources to deploy reporters at specific locations and just does not churn out news as given by news agencies. 'GNN News' uses 'Reporter from location' but 'Anchor over pics' is used more. This clearly indicates that it takes a short cut by using this news treatment. It reflects that the channel invests less in news gathering and tries to make do with the news coming from agencies. Panel/Studio Interviews are never used by either of the channels. This means that the channels do not invest in calling experts and doing an analysis of issues. They are only concerned with churning 'breaking news' one after another and not having experts discussing news stories and helping the public form opinions.
- Both the channels have advertisements only by Domestic/Foreign Companies, no Govt/PSU Ads. It means that they do not get any advertisements from the government sector. It also shows that the channels have enough private advertisers or enough revenue to keep them running without any Government advertisements.
- GNN News' has a huge share of advertisements in the 'Service Sector' as it issues a lot of in-house manufactured Public Service Messages. This reflects that GNN intends to create a farce of being a channel related to development and issues by showing advertisements of service sector instead of catering to 'news' related to social issues. Self-Promotion too comprises a big share in both the channels. Due to the lack of advertisements from the government sector, both the channels indulge in self-promotion in the available air-time.

## Conclusion

By analyzing the data from both the channels we see that news is actually not that diverse in U.P. Political news occupies the biggest share in the bulletins and within it, upper caste males get the biggest share. Of the two channels 'Aalami Sahara' tries a notch higher to be diverse by incorporating voices from Vaishyas/Kshatriyas but fails to cater to voices of minorities and women. Thus, irrespective of the language, be it Urdu or Hindi, news does not come across as being diverse and actually there is a 'façade of media plurality' (Thussu, 2005). Media pluralism does not exist in U. P. as it seems that the channels are controlled by few men in power. Both are privately owned channels and also do not have any Government funded advertisements. The channels do not fairly reflect the voices of society in its ethnic, linguistic, religious, political, geographical and social diversity and did not make an effort to reach out to under-represented groups of people.

In order to be more pluralistic, these channels should try and incorporate more voices and cater to news from all aspects of the society. Media diversity supports, promotes, deepens, consolidates and strengthens democracy, nation building, social cohesion and good governance. Especially for the poor and marginalized, media freedom should be understood to include their participation not merely as consumers, but also as producers of news and analysis. There can be no real media freedom if commercial imperatives start to impact directly on the content on a day-to-day basis. It is because of an acknowledgement of the importance of diverse and pluralistic media for the sustainability of democracy. Diversity of views and opinions promoting different perspectives enriches citizens to participate in a people driven democratic process. It is therefore in the interest of states to support media diversity and pluralism.

## Notes and References

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