

**PORTRAYAL OF NORTHEAST INDIA IN MAINSTREAM MEDIA:
A CASE OF UNDERREPRESENTATION AND
MISINTERPRETATION**

Haoginlen Chongloi*

Abstract

Freedom of speech and expression has been an important ingredient in our democratic life. Its power in shaping the minds of the public has been recognized prior to the existence of the institution of democracy. Till today the role of media, to generalize, is becoming more important than ever. However, in the light of such development, the media is neither free from criticism. Its recognized character of being a 'double-edge weapon' cannot be totally overlooked.

The present paper seeks to understand the coverage of northeast India, by mainstream papers- The Hindu, the Times of India, Hindustan Times and the Indian Express- which greatly helped in shaping attitudes toward this particular region of the country by newsreaders. It throws light into the meager attention given to the region by mainstream media. Further, also deals with how these regions are presented in the media which pose serious consequences toward the northeast region and its people by mainstream media consumers.

*** PhD Candidate, Department of Mass Communication, Manipur University, Imphal**

Introduction

Communication is the process of sharing of information which involves creating, sending and receiving information. It is important for understanding and providing knowledge to the common masses. A meaningful creates an environment where people understand and appreciate their surroundings, and facilitate relationships between and among individuals and societies. Communication can take place in many ways: oral or written; formal or informal; verbal or non-verbal; traditional or modern. Whatever form it takes, communication is meant to convey information from one party to another. The process takes place as a result of its constituent elements viz the source, message, medium, receiver and reaction. Communication can take place in any forms. Moreover, communication taking place between a mass medium and its audience is therefore called mass communication. Those elements which are required for a communication to take place between sender and receiver are collectively known as the 'media'. The word 'media' comes from the plural of the Latin word 'medium', and it is used as a collective noun to refer to television, radio, newspapers, magazines, films, the International Network (Internet), etc. The media can be examined either in terms of traditional media, broadcast media, or print media. In certain instances, the word 'press' is used to refer to the print media, while in other instances the word 'journalism' is used to describe the business or practice of writing and producing news. The phrase 'mass media' is sometimes used to describe the collective entity of the media. In this study, the word media is used to refer to mainstream print media based in metropolitan Indian cities.

Concept of fair, objective and balanced reporting

The concept of objectivity in journalism developed almost a century ago, as a reaction to the sensational, opinion-driven reporting that was common in most newspapers of the day. The term 'objectivity' was originally used to describe a journalistic approach or method; journalists would seek to present the news in an objective way, without reflecting any personal or corporate bias. Over time, objectivity was required from the journalists themselves. The executive editor of the American newspaper The Washington Post, Leonard Downie, took the concept so seriously that

he refused to register to vote. But many journalists today concede that total objectivity is impossible.¹

In 1996, the U.S. Society of Professional Journalists dropped the word ‘objectivity’ from its code of ethics. Journalists are human beings, after all. They care about their work and they do have opinions. Claiming that they are completely objective suggests that they have no values. Instead, journalists have largely agreed that they must be aware of their own opinions so they can keep them in check. The audience should not be able to judge from the story what the journalist’s opinion is. By using an objective, scientific method for verifying information, journalists can report stories that do not reflect their own personal views. The story itself, in other words, should be impartial and fair. In a complex world where information is no longer a scarce commodity, the role of the journalist has become more important than ever. Journalists must also strive to be fair in their reporting by not telling one-sided stories. The integrity in looking for contrasting views without favoring one side or another is one important aspect in the profession. In addition to verifying of fact, they will seek out differing opinions in cases where the facts are in dispute. Fairness, however, is not the same thing as balance. Balance suggests that there are only two sides to any story, which is rarely the case, and that each side should be given equal weight. Journalists who seek that kind of artificial balance in their stories actually may produce coverage that is fundamentally inaccurate.

The challenge for journalists is to report all significant viewpoints in a way that is fair to those involved and that also presents a complete and honest picture to the audience. “Fairness means, among other things, listening to different viewpoints, and incorporating them into the journalism,” says reporter and blogger Dan Gillmor. “It does not mean parroting lies or distortions to achieve that lazy equivalence that leads some journalists to get opposing quotes when the facts overwhelmingly support one side.”

Journalism is a double-edge weapon. It has the power to create wonders and at the same time brings disaster to the system. In a democratic system of governance, it is considered as the fourth

¹ Taflinger, R.F. (1996). The myth of objectivity in Journalism: A Commentary. Wall Street Journal. Retrieved from <http://public.wsu.edu/~taflinge/mythobj.html>

pillar of democracy. Its importance on the smooth functioning of democracy cannot be undermined. A society where there is a lack of this particular weapon always has the tendencies of being under chaos. So ensuring that freedom of expression as a right guaranteed to all citizens will systematically ensure national progress. As the concept of development moved from economic centrism to social based issues, this particular concept of free expression can also be a measuring scale in our development paradigm.²

In its simplest sense, when news items lack objectivity we called the news as biased. It may include news reporting, presentation of news, space allocated and accepting one-sided perspectives. The issue of biasness is not a recent origin either. It is as old as the history of journalism. The birth of the concept of alternative media can even be the chief reason as a result of biased reporting. It is a situation where a news reporter, editors and writers are under the influence of any particular group thereby favoring a particular group. In most cases biased news can be cause due to the subjective interpretations or believes of people who are in the profession.

NORTHEAST INDIA AND THE NEED OF FAIR REPORTING

Northeast consist of states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura in northeastern India. These states cover a geographical area of 2,62,179 square kilometers, which is about 7.97% of India's total area. As of 2011 they had a population of 45.53 million, about 3.07 percent of India's total population.³ Although there is great diversity within the seven states, they bear similarities in culture, history and ethnicity of the people.

With complexity at its extreme the region witnessed several political and cultural conflicts since even after 60 years of independence. These range from secession to autonomy, movement against illegal-immigrants, ethnic conflicts and the perceived sense of isolation from mainstream India which has resulted in violence and mass mobilization.⁴ It also exhibits multiplicity of socio-political instability and economic backwardness which is believed to have retarded the

² Bellu, L.G. (2011, May). Dvelopment and Development Paadigms. EASYPol Resource for Policy Making, 102. Rome: Food and Agriculture Orgaisation

³ Census India. (2011). Ministry of Home Affairs. Retrieved from http://mha.nic.in/northeast_new

⁴ Pegu, U.K. (2014). Media Coverage on the Conflict in North-East: An analysis on the uses and challenges in Conflict Communication. *Global Journal of Finance and Management*, 6/1, 89-92

process of development in northeast. The approach that is being adopted by successive government in addressing the diverse ethnic aspirations of the people in the region has failed miserably. Besides, lack of consistency and firmness in dealing with the issues which concerns the people of the region has added another dimension as it poses economic, social and cultural threats and has provided cause for conflict and violence.

The media is the most powerful entity on earth when it comes to creating and shaping the minds of the public. They have the power to make the innocent feel guilty, and the guilty feels innocent and that's the power. In this way media has a major role to play in containing the spread of conflict by disseminating knowledge to the public with the widest coverage. While it is believed that the media can move issues to the center stage or keep them out of public view, it seems logical to examine how it could be an instrument which could foster change.

Media coverage of northeast has been under constant criticism because the quantum of media coverage on certain issues is not sufficient to keep the people meaningfully informed. Moreover, the media professionals need to realize the complexity of the region and its ethnic composition, especially if they want to engage in a meaningful communication with the masses. A purposeful and impact bearing information dissemination can emerge only after an assessment on the political and historical contours and by examining the gaps in the dissemination of information on the issue. The biggest challenge for the media is to ensure balanced reporting with a view to preventing escalation of conflict keeping in mind the complexities involved in the system. It remains to be seen how it could be maintained, given the fact that conflict sells better than co-operation in media business. Tensions frequently escalate in situations where information is scarce, one-sided or misinformed.

Therefore, providing a variety of information that contains a range of facts, perspectives and opinions would be a deescalating measure. The way in which journalists report on conflict can drastically affect the audiences' perception of the situation and thus may aggravate the situation. Furthermore, it becomes all the more difficult in upholding one's journalistic objectivity and reporting events with an attitude towards conciliation.⁵

⁵ Ibid.

NORTHEAST INDIA: UNDERREPRESENTATION AND MISINTERPRETATION**Table -1: TOTAL NUMBER OF STORIES IN MAINSTREAM NEWSPAPERS**

YEAR	Hindustan Times	Times of India	The Hindu	The Indian Express	Total
January 2015	42	16	33	28	119
January 2016	43	18	45	32	138

Northeast India has been recognized as one of the least known region by mainland Indians. Partly owing to the racial and cultural differences it have over mainland Indians, the mongoloid looking people of the region has been continuously viewed from the prism of suspicion and doubt. According to the study as given in the table above, northeast region with a population of over 45 million covering 7.97% of the total geographical area of India is one of the least represented regions in the Indian mainstream media. In January 2015, northeast appeared a total of 119 times in India's leading publishing house- the Hindustan Times, Times of India, The Hindu and The Indian Express. With the Hindustan Times leading the number of times publishing news of the northeast, the Times of India reported the least with merely 16 times. January 2016 saw little improvement from its previous year with a total of 138 appearances in the four mainstream media. However, it is far behind satisfactory for over 40 million people. Northeast news appeared 45 times in The Hindu, 43 in the Hindustan Times, 32 in The Indian Express, and the least in Times of India with just 18. Moreover, a more disturbing picture of the its representation is that about 72% of the news items from the northeast are either in brief news or short stories, and does hardly feature in the front page.

The above statistics are clear indication of neglect of one of the most diverse region in the country. The resultant outcome of such underrepresentation by mainstream media is seen in the manner the people are discriminated by its mainland counterparts in several ways. One of media most important value 'bridging the divide' is yet to be adopted by practitioners in true journalistic spirit.

Table -2: NORTHEAST NEWS AS PUBLISHED IN JANUARY 2015

Newspaper/Content	Hindustan Times	Times of India	The Hindu	The Indian Express	Total
Crime/ Insurgency	21	16	20	18	75
Politics	10	5	8	6	29
Art/Entertainment	6	-	5	4	15
Editorials	-	-	-	-	0
Total	37	21	33	28	119

The above figures are some of India's most read newspapers and their coverage on the northeast for the month of January 2015. The Hindustan Times which covers 37 times stands at the top while The Hindu with 33 publications stood second. So, the share of both the paper is 31% and 27% against the total of 119 news reports. The Indian Express reports 28 times earning a share of 23% for the month whereas the Times of India with 21 stands at the lowest. Its share is meagre 17% of the news featured in the month. Though northeast constitutes over 40 million of India's population and 7.97% of total geographical area, its coverage on the news is hardly in consonance with its geographical size or population.

Table-3: NEWS CONTENT AS PUBLISHED IN JANUARY 2016

NEWSPAPERS/CONTENT	Hindustan Times	Times of India	The Hindu	The Indian Express	Total
Crime/ Insurgency	22	16	21	17	76
Politics	14	4	17	9	44
Art/Entertainment	5	2	3	2	12
Editorials	2	-	1	3	6
Total	43	22	42	31	138

Table-3 shows data for the month of January 2016 taken and analyzed, and the figures present a little improvement over the previous year. The Hindustan Times which is lowest in circulation in

the region have a report on the northeast about 43 times which is 31% of the total 138 reporting. On the other hand The Hindu also witnessed a positive growth and has a news share of 30% for the month. The Indian Express occupies a share of 22% which is lesser than its previous year share standing at 23%. The Times of India which enjoys the highest circulation in India is least interested in the coverage of the region. Of the total reporting of 138 times in these newspapers, the Times of India reported merely 22 times which has a share of 15%. Like the Indian express, the paper experience negative share against its previous year which stands at 17%.

Table-4: **PERCENTAGE OF CRIME/INSURGENCY STORIES**

Content/Year	Crime/Insurgency	Politics	Art/ Entertainment	Editorials
January 2015	63.02	24.36	12.6	-
January 2016	55.07	31.88	8.69	4.34

Being in the news does not constitute being fairly represented. By being fairly represented it implies how a particular object or issues is being presented and portrayed in the media. Not only is the northeast underrepresented in the mainstream media, but also the region is being constantly exposed as associated with violence, ethnic rivalries, underdeveloped and inhospitable to its readers.

The above table shows how the region is being presented in the media. In January 2015, of the total appearance of northeast in four major dailies, Crimes and Insurgency which constitute 'negative news' has the biggest share with 75 appearances against the total of 119 news items. Topics on political development feature 29 times whereas art and entertainment appeared 15 times. Surprisingly, northeast does not receive any editorial share in any of the four leading papers during the period. The share of negative news and presentation is about 63.02% of the total appearances.

Though little improvement is seen on the number of coverage in January 2016, the representation styles of the region is far from expectations. Of the total appearance of northeast in four major dailies, crimes and insurgency still occupies the top news content. In a total of 138 appearances,

crimes and insurgency occupies features about 76 times, whereas politics and art features 44 and 12 times respectively. Incidentally, the editorial take of the region is 6 times during the period, a likely indication of the concern the publication have on the region. Therefore, negative news feature more in the media to a whooping of 55.07%, a little lower than the previous year sample.

It is generally understood that media shapes attitude of the people through continuous presentations and persuasions. According to Hypodermic/magic bullet/agenda setting theory, human understanding of things surrounding him can be shaped by continuous infusion of knowledge. In the context of the northeast, the continuous presentations and portrayal of the region as crime laden, dirty politics, insurgency infested, blockade and strikes can pose serious consequences to its newsreaders. As media has the agenda setting capacity, it could change the worldview of the region to degrading and sub-human landlocked settlements thus posing a threat to our diversity, stability and unity as a nation.

Reporting principles: A defense to criticism

‘Biased reporting’ toward the northeastern states by mainstream media is what every analyst concludes. A regular reader of mainstream newspapers is most likely going to have a stronger sense of this phenomenon. The number of issues reported, the space allotted and the types of news it covered are what can be termed as ‘representational suicide’ of the northeast. However, a hypothetical theory on the issue could be an explanation for under-reporting of the region.

In the profession of journalism there are certain principles followed by reporters and editors while covering an event. Some of the principles followed while covering a particular event or editing are: Timeliness, Relevance and Proximity. Timeliness refers to the timely coverage done on a particular event. This is one of the most important rules especially among daily newspapers. As news is a perishable commodity, there is a need for urgency in covering and publishing. If this is not followed, news values are lost and ultimately there is no point of being called news.

Relevance is the importance given to certain news which is of great public interest. All happenings around cannot be covered in a news item. The best that suits the readers, which interest the readers, are given space in newspapers. For example, coverage of ADC elections in

Manipur by Imphal based newspapers would have more relevance to its readers in Imphal, than that of Municipal Elections in West Bengal. Even within a state too, people tends to read more of thing which has its relevance in their lives.

Proximity is a factor in deciding the importance of news value with the distance of news publications. To be precise, news source which is nearer to the publication establishment will get more coverage in the news whereas those which are far away in distance is likely to be rejected for publication. That's the rule of proximity. In other words, the number of news coverage is inversely proportional to the length of distance of news from the place of publication.

The above three principles, could be one main reason for the lack of reporting pertaining to the northeast by mainstream media. Among them a strong contender could be the Proximity Factor which is otherwise taken as an excuse on the criticism. Applying the proximity factor, newspapers establishments may find reasons to hold their ground; however, if seen from the types of news it reported the charge against them has its validity. Crime and insurgency got the highest proportion of the news on northeast, thus presenting the region is a negative light. Therefore, it can be safely assumed that mainstream media paid attention to northeast only when it is related crime and violence thereby portraying northeast in bad light. Presenting the region as violence infested, therefore, does more harm than the harm felt on being underreported.

Conclusion and suggestions

Though journalism is a profession without which democracy cannot survive, it is also considered as a challenging profession which borne great risk to the practitioners and consumers. Therefore it has been regarded as a double-edge weapon by many writers.

Mainstream media reporting on the region is minimal. If one is convinced of its geographical location, there are still logical questions to be noted on how the region is portrayed and presented to its readers. These senses of alienation toward the region in the media have implications toward our diversity and integrity as a nation. To remove these barriers, few strategies may be adopted by policy makers and media houses. Staffs and reporters are drawn from the backward and neglected region of the country. This will ensure fairness while editing and selection of news

item. Also the media houses have to field more reporters to cover events. This will ensure fairness while reporting which deserve bias-free presentation. Mainstream media in order to create good and positive impression must also need to engage special beats on developing/positive news and not concerned just crime and insurgency, thereby enhancing the image of the region among the news consuming mass. Moreover, media ombudsman where the public feels free to approach their grievances about fair and positive reporting is overdue. Like the right to judicial remedies being termed the heart and soul of the constitution, media ombudsman should serve the general public by acting between the consuming mass and its producers. Last but not the least, enacting suitable regulation and therefore instituting a committee to regulate the day to day functioning of the press will ensure that no region of the country is left out in our public domain.

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